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## HOW TO READ SHAKSPEARE

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AFTER THE STRATFORD PORTRAIT

*William Shakspeare*



# HOW TO READ SHAKSPEARE

A GUIDE FOR THE GENERAL READER

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TO

A. M. B. D.



## PREFACE

THIS book is not intended for the student or the scholar—although, it is hoped, to expert eyes the marks of acquaintance with the best authorities may be everywhere visible—but for those who would like to be readers of Shakspeare but are deterred by the difficulties of approach. In the English-speaking lands there are multitudes who read the dramatist with intelligence and delight ; but, in this century of universal reading, the numbers enjoying this means of culture might be vastly increased ; and the purpose of this book is to serve as a Murray or Baedeker for those to whom this is to a large extent an unvisited land—to let them know how to get there and what there is to see.

Apart from the mere pleasure of reading, which grows with repetition, I have cultivated an intimacy with these writings chiefly for the

purpose of fertilising my own mind by the periodical discharge on it of the whole volume of Shakspeare's language and ideas ; and I write in order to facilitate for other intellectual workers the same beneficent inundation.

But I have also to avow another purpose. Of the poet Burns it was remarked by Rabbi Duncan, the saint and sage, that he is too great a fact to be ignored, and that, therefore, religious teachers should make the most and the best of him. Of Shakspeare the same may be said : he is so great an asset of the English-speaking world that none possessed of intellectual tastes and aspirations can pass him by ; and I should like to show to Christian people how, in spite of not a little which cannot but be repulsive to pure minds, they may reckon these productions of genius, as a whole, among the objects of which it is written, "All things are yours".

When I think of the great scholars who are devoting their days and nights to the interpretation of Shakspeare, I am half ashamed to bring into any kind of competition with their work that which is confessedly a product of leisure-time. But these *messieurs* will accept the plea, that the readers whom I am seeking

are those whom they have missed. I am not offering to take any regular class in the school—not even the lowest—but I am trying to capture those who, having left the school or even playing truant from it, may be lured, in forgetfulness of text-books and examination-papers, not to study a classic but to read a book. The graver and more exacting is our ordinary occupation, the more do we require a relaxation, to help the mind to recover its tone ; Shakspeare has been mine ; and my services are offered humbly to those approaching him in the same holiday-spirit. Yet I sometimes flatter myself that long practice, in another field, in making crooked things straight and rough places plain may have bred a certain facility in the art of divining the purpose of a play and tracking the continuity of thought from play to play or from one group of plays to another.

In the quotations I have followed the text of Dyce, checked by that of Gollancz.

To my friends, Miss Jane T. Stoddart, of London, and Mr. William Murison, M.A., of the Aberdeen Grammar School, I am deeply indebted not only for reading the proofs but for not a few valuable suggestions.

ABERDEEN, *September*, 1913.





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THE ENGLISH HISTORIES

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE ENGLISH HISTORIES

SHAKSPEARE is a territory so vast that the reader who desires to take possession of it requires to parcel it out into provinces and conquer these one by one. The great divisions are obvious : the plays divide themselves into Histories, Comedies and Tragedies ; and the Sonnets, with the miscellaneous poems, may be reckoned as a fourth division. Some at least of these divisions would, however, require to be subdivided. Thus the Histories naturally fall into the English and the Ancient ; and the Comedies may be divided into the Gayer and the Graver.

A very important question for the beginner is, with which of the great divisions he ought to commence. In most editions, if I am not mistaken, the Comedies are printed first, and with these the conscientious and unsophisticated reader is accordingly apt to begin. This, however, is a mistake. A great deal of Shakspeare's poorest work is in the Comedies ; and, besides, these are far more difficult to read than the other plays, being full of obsolete words and phrases, of which the beginner can make little or nothing. I can still

remember how, as a boy, I was put out and discouraged by these obscurities; and many are, I believe, permanently alienated from this study by trying to enter by the wrong door.

It seems to me that by far the best way to begin is with the English Histories. Here you get at once, in *King John*, a poem of the highest excellence, brilliant in diction and easily intelligible; and the four plays which immediately follow are also simple in language and yet, both in conception and execution, up almost to the author's highest level.

This, however, is not the only reason for placing the English Histories first. They were the first section of his work which the author completed. He did not, indeed, write them quite continuously: a few of the Comedies and one or two of the Tragedies were mixed up with them: but, with the single exception of *Henry the Eighth*, which belongs to the very close of his career the English Histories were early work, and the whole set was finished when the other two series were little more than begun.

It would hardly be too much to say that the English Histories made Shakspeare. It is natural for a poet to open his career with subjects belonging to the domain of pure fancy, where the characters and the incidents are of his own invention and he is at perfect liberty to shape everything according to his own will, as long as he keeps within the bounds of probability.

But there is danger of lingering too long in this region. It is too shadowy and impalpable, and it converts the poet into a dreamer, lost to the sympathies of common men. Shelley is an example of a poet who inhabited this dreamland of fancy too long. In his earliest productions Shakspeare also dwelt in this ideal world ; but happily at an early period his star led him to the task of dramatizing the reigns of the sovereigns of his country. Here he was brought into close contact with the actual. The outlines of the plot were supplied to him by the record of events, and his fancy had to keep within the bounds thus prescribed. The incidents, at least in their main body and succession, had actually taken place ; the *dramatis personæ* were real men and women. Thus the young poet was kept to reality and learned to know the passions, the ambitions and the sorrows of the heart, not only as these might be conceived in the imagination but as they had actually been embodied in historical events. This was the right education for a mind like his ; the fidelity with which he clung to his chosen task proves that he felt it to be so ; and in the results, as they lie before us, we can still trace the rapid and marvellous development which under this discipline, his powers underwent.

The English Histories are ten in number ; but there is a marked difference in value between the first five and the last five.<sup>1</sup> The latest of all, *Henry the Eighth*,

<sup>1</sup> That is, as they are now printed.

being so far separated from the rest in the time of its composition, stands by itself; and, if the first of all, *King John*, be also put by itself, there is a great and instructive contrast between the first four and the last four of the eight which remain.

It would appear that, before Shakspeare arrived in London, to begin the work of his life, there already existed dramatizations of several portions of English history, which were popular with the public. Who their authors were is now uncertain; the manuscripts were the property of the theatre; and the proprietors, or those employed by them, could at pleasure add to or take from what had been written, to suit the exigencies of time or the tastes of their customers. Probably the very first work which Shakspeare had to do as a writer was the adaptation of some of these plays. Being himself one of the actors, he could see, as he was playing, how they might be improved; and his employers gave the requisite permission.

In the three plays which appear in his works as the First, the Second and the Third Parts of *Henry the Sixth*, it is believed, we possess specimens of this renovating process—dramas by old hands which the young playwright remodelled—and it is a fine task for literary critics to determine how much is his and how much is old. They have not lacked confidence; and they tell us that “out of 6043 lines, 1771 were written by some author preceding Shakspeare, 2373



by him on the foundation laid by his predecessors ; and 1899 were entirely his own".<sup>1</sup> Of course such estimates are largely conjectural ; but it is impossible to read the three parts of *Henry the Sixth* without feeling how inferior everything is to the Histories written later : the verse is comparatively unmusical and the thinking thin ; few passages tempt to quotation ; the representation lacks subtlety ; and the plot plods laboriously after the details of the history. If this is Shakspeare at all, you say, it is only his "' prentice hand".

But this work had interested the young poet ; the public interest may also have spurred him on ; besides, the three plays represented a series of events which they left incomplete ; and, accordingly, he was induced to write a new drama completing them. This was *Richard the Third*, which is the first of the historical plays entirely his own. It is a powerful piece and has always enjoyed a great popularity. It is the picture of a villain, who stalks through blood and crime to the object of his ambition ; and in it Shakspeare for the first time handles the great subject of conscience, which was subsequently to play a marked part in his work. Everyone remembers how, on the night before the fatal battle of Bosworth, the ghosts of those whom he has murdered come, one after another, into Richard's tent and summon him, in his dreams, to

<sup>1</sup> EMERSON, *Representative Men*.

meet them on the morrow on the battlefield; and how he starts out of sleep, crying, "Give me another horse; bind up my wounds. Have mercy, Jesu," and then, as he lies trembling, confesses:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.

Although, however, there is a great deal of rough power in this drama, it is, in comparison with the author's later work, a crude performance. King Richard is a conscious villain and hypocrite; indeed, in the very first scene he declares to himself:

I am determined to prove a villain;

and, all through the play, he never attempts for a moment to mask his villainy from his own eyes. He is a monster of iniquity, such as Shakspeare would never have thought of painting in his maturity, when he had learned that even the hypocrite begins by deceiving himself. A still more unmistakable mark of juvenility is the gross manner in which woman is represented. The Lady Anne is wooed and won by Richard, the murderer of her husband, in presence of the coffin of her father-in-law, whom he has also slain; and the conduct of Queen Elizabeth is hardly less unwomanly. There could not be a greater contrast than between these representations of woman

and that in the person of Queen Katharine in the latest of the Histories, *Henry the Eighth*.

No doubt, however, *Richard the Third* must have brought to the young poet immense applause, for nothing equal to its best passages had ever before been witnessed on the English stage; he had probably been bitten, too, with the interest of the history; and so he was induced to go on. In the drama which he had just completed, as in the three parts of *Henry the Sixth*, he had been dealing with the fall of the House of Lancaster, which involved England in the miseries of the Wars of the Roses. The study of these events obtruded on his mind the question of the origin of these wars; and so he was carried back to the rise of the House of Lancaster in the usurpation of Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, who dethroned Richard II. and became Henry the Fourth. In working out this phase of the history he composed four plays—*Richard the Second*, *Henry the Fourth* (in two parts) and *Henry the Fifth*. These are all closely connected; and in them we see the genius of the poet coming to maturity. The music of the verse, the mastery of the material, the comprehension of human motives and the development of character all advance to perfection with astonishing rapidity. The poet is now master of a diction stately, brilliant and answerable to the dignity of history; yet he handles it with perfect freedom and can modify it to suit the peculiarities of his several

characters; while in the comic passages, with which the two parts of *Henry the Fourth* especially abound, he descends without difficulty from this exalted style and abandons himself to the licence of a brilliant prose. In the characters there is now the variety of shading exhibited by human nature; and they no longer rant in the tone of the stage but converse with the restraint of real life. Passages occur on almost every page which you feel inclined to quote—sometimes only a line or two of condensed and proverbial wisdom, sometimes a lengthy outburst of sustained eloquence, sometimes a figure of speech elaborately worked out, sometimes a scene of delicate beauty or moving pathos.

*King John*, the first of all the Histories in time, stands by itself, separated in its subject from these four connected dramas; but it is on the same level of excellence. *Henry the Eighth*, at the opposite end of the decade of dramas, is also a noble poem, remarkable not only for the fine picture, already alluded to, of an unselfish, patriotic and highminded woman in the person of Queen Katharine, but for the spectacle of Cardinal Wolsey in his splendour and his fall. In this drama, however, Shakspeare is believed to have been again working in collaboration with another dramatist, so that the work is unequal and lacks unity.

On the whole, therefore, the first five Histories<sup>1</sup> are

<sup>1</sup> That is, as generally printed.

those in which we see Shakspeare at his best ; and the other five serve rather as a foil to make visible by what stages he advanced to perfection.

The saying of the celebrated Duke of Marlborough is well known, that he knew English history only as he had learned it from these Histories of Shakspeare. But, though this remark has often been praised, it is misleading. No doubt a man might derive a deep attachment to his native country through reading these poems alone ; and this is one of the best results of reading history ; but he could not from Shakspeare obtain anything like so accurate an account of the facts of history as he might from the commonest schoolbook. In the first place, there are great blanks : it is only an inconsiderable number of the reigns of the English monarchs that Shakspeare has dramatized. Besides, a great deal has been left out even in the reigns with which he has dealt ; and any close inquiry would discover numerous anachronisms.<sup>1</sup> Shakspeare's aim is misunderstood when, in any usual sense, he is regarded as a teacher of historical facts. He was a poet, and selected from the materials supplied to his hand the elements which could be poetically treated. He could not depart very far from fact, for this would have excited protest in the minds of those acquainted

<sup>1</sup> Examples in Ulrici, *Shakspeare's Dramatic Art*, bk. VI., ch. II.

with the history ; but he was not nervous about accuracy in details. What he had to do was to select out of the materials of a reign those which were poetically significant and build these into a structure which should be in itself a thing of beauty, and yet should sufficiently correspond with the facts to justify its name ; and the marvel of the whole thing is, how he could take the common and chaotic materials presented in an ordinary chronicle and transmute them into a coherent, melodious, eloquent poem, which can thrill us with passion or make us shake with laughter or move us to tears.

Equally mistaken, in my opinion, is the attempt to find in these poems a philosophy of history. German critics have gone most astray in this direction, reading into the poet their own ideas under the pretence that they are expounding his. Ulrici, for example, in the work just quoted, tries to show that Shakspeare, having before him all the forces of the time, such as Chivalry, the Church, the Crown, the Commons, and so forth, has accurately shown their relations to one another and their interaction,<sup>1</sup> making visible, so to speak, the concealed wires by which the puppets of history were moved and the ends towards which Providence was guiding the half-conscious movements of men. This, it seems to me, is a complete exaggeration. There is of course a certain amount of truth in it. In the eight central dramas especially

there is a close articulation. It is made clear that in the very way in which the Lancastrian dynasty came to the throne there lay the seed and prophecy of its ultimate decline; and the reader is conscious, all through, of this predetermined fate working itself out. But, on the other hand, Shakspeare displays little apprehension of the crescent forces of English history even in the periods to which his dramas refer. In *King John*, for example, Magna Charta holds a very insignificant place; and no emphasis is laid anywhere on the growth of law or religious opinion or the power of the common people. In any philosophical history of England, such as Green's, the development of these forces is exhibited with far more interest than in Shakspeare; and the reason is, that to write the philosophy of history was not Shakspeare's business. It is not with the hidden principles by which history is moved that he is concerned, but with the action itself. He approaches the history from the outside and, observing as a spectator its movement, its splendour, its pathos, points out to others its significant features. What, he asks, took place in those days of old which is worthy to be remembered and to be sung? It is not in abstract forces working behind history that he is interested, but in the passions of the actors: who were the men and women who made the history? and how did the history mould and develop them?

There are four outstanding themes, which may be called the pivots round which the poet's thought revolves: these are Patriotism, Royalty, War and Character.

PATRIOTISM.—It is a common criticism that the mind of Shakspeare was so catholic and impartial—he was able so perfectly to put himself into the place of every character which he created—that it is impossible to tell what his own sentiments were. To a large extent this is true: he knew human nature in all its forms, whether great or mean, and he could enter so sympathetically into the views and feelings of king and beggar alike that, even when he is expressing an opinion with the greatest force, it is difficult to say whether he is speaking with the force of conviction or only with the borrowed passion of the person of the drama. Occasionally, however, he drops the mask, and there is an accent which betrays that his own heart is speaking.

Nowhere is this so obviously the case, in these Histories, as when he is giving utterance to patriotic sentiment. Here he is as much himself as Milton in his sonnets or Burns in his songs. The name of England always touches Shakspeare to the quick; and he cannot utter it without a rush of emotion. He calls England, in allusion to the chalk cliffs of the southern coast,



that pale, that white-faced shore  
Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides  
And coops from other lands her islanders.

England, hedged-in with the main,  
That water-walled bulwark, still secure  
And confident from foreign purposes.

The most wonderful passage of this kind is in the dying utterances of John of Gaunt. The King, his nephew, has so mismanaged the revenues that they are all pawned and bonded to creditors, and he, as his uncle tells him, is "landlord of England, not its king." The dying noble is tortured with the shame of his country's condition, and breaks out thus :

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise ;  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war ;  
This happy breed of men, this little world ;  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands ;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England ;  
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings,  
Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,  
Renowned for their deeds as far from home—

For Christian service and true chivalry—  
 As is the sepulchre—in stubborn Jewry—  
 Of the world's ransom, blessed Mary's Son ;  
 This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land,  
 Is now leased out—I die pronouncing it—  
 Like to a tenement or pelting farm.  
 Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,  
 How happy then were my ensuing death.<sup>1</sup>

Passages like this must have roused enormous enthusiasm in the auditors who first heard them ; and Shakspeare feeds their fervour by contrasting England and the English character with other nations. He is impatient of the tendency of his countrymen to copy foreign manners, such as

fashions in proud Italy,  
 Whose manners still our tardy-apish nation  
 Limp after in base imitation.  
 Where doth the world thrust forth a vanity—  
 So it be new, there's no respect how vile—  
 That is not quickly buzzed into our ears?

A large portion of the action of the Histories is occupied with the French wars ; and he is never weary of the contrast between French and English—French bragging and English valour, French volubility and English reserve, French polish and English down-

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of facility in reading, some lines have been left out. So also at pp. 22, 23, 24, 25, 33, 34, 35, 73, 90, 92, 93, 165, 168, 169, 173, 174, 177, 234, 239, 261, 267, 271.

rightness, French lightness and English weight. He says that a single pair of English legs could carry three French bodies. An English herald thus addresses the French army, which has landed in England :

That hand which had the strength, even at your  
door,

To cudgel you and make you take the hatch ;

To dive, like buckets, in concealed wells ;

To crouch in litter of your stable-planks ;

To lie, like pawns, locked up in chests and trunks ;

To hug with swine ; to seek sweet safety out

In vaults and prisons ; and to thrill and shake

Even at the crying of your nation's crow,

Thinking his voice an armed Englishman—

Shall that victorious hand be feebled here

That in your chambers gave you chastisement ?

No : know, the gallant monarch is in arms,

And, like an eagle, o'er his aery towers,

To souse annoyance which comes near his nest.

The Welsh, Irish and Scotch characters are likewise contrasted with the English, of course to the advantage of the latter. The Welshman, all through Shakspeare's plays, is a favourite butt, with his odd way of pronouncing the English language, his pedantry and his self-esteem ; and the fun was probably good at the time, though to us now it is rather heavy. Shakspeare does not make much of the Irishman : he left the

infinite possibilities of drollery lodged in Pat to be bagged by Thackeray. Nor is very much made of the Scot, though Sandy even then, in ways suitable to the times, had learned his trick of fattening his lantern jaws on the good things of the South :

There's a saying, very old and true,

“If that you will France win,

Then with Scotland first begin” :

For, once the eagle England being in prey,

To her unguarded nest the weasel Scot

Comes sneaking, and so sucks her princely eggs,

Playing the mouse in absence of the cat,

To tear and havoc more than she can eat.

As the representative of patriotism in the Histories may be taken Faulconbridge in the first of them. This is one of Shakspeare's most peculiar characters, and he appears to be a pure creation. When first he comes upon the scene, he seems intended for a comic character ; and there is in him throughout an element of sarcastic criticism ; he makes fun of the conventionalities of life and of the pomp and pretence of war, and not less does he turn his scorn against himself in a tone of raillery that recalls Thackeray ; but, as the action proceeds, his character deepens ; the peril of his country makes a hero of him ; and the play closes with these rousing words of his :

This England never did, nor never shall  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,  
But when it first did help to wound itself.  
Now these her princes are come home again,  
Come the three corners of the world in arms,  
And we shall shock them ; nought shall make us rue,  
If England to itself do rest but true.

ROYALTY.—Shakspeare is no demagogue ; he has no idea even of the sovereignty of the people, of which everybody nowadays speaks with so much respect. To him the people was

The blunt monster with uncounted heads,  
The still-discordant, wavering multitude.

In the period of which he was writing in these Histories the most conspicuous and perfect form of human life was that of the king, and he paints it in all its opulence—in its dignities, prerogatives and functions. The position that came nearest to it was perhaps that of the great ecclesiastic ; and this also he has portrayed in the proud papal legate Pandulph and the extravagant Cardinal Wolsey. Next came the great nobles ; and these also are described in their ambitions and services ; but it is in the sunshine of the throne that they live, and they wither in its shadow. The middle class hardly appears in Shakspeare except as the hurraing multitude on a day of triumph : its day and its histor-

ians were still in the future. As for the multitude, they are, as Falstaff calls them, "food for powder" in the quarrels of their superiors.

So supreme was the position of the king that he to whom it was vouchsafed was supposed to have been destined for it by the special appointment of Heaven, and it was sacrilege to remove him :

Not all the water in the rough-rude sea  
Can wash the balm from an anointed king.  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.

But, although this was the accepted theory, which was of course firmly held by those to whom, in the distribution of fortune, had fallen this incomparable lot, yet the divinity that doth hedge a king did not prevent those who were not born to the position from aiming at it. The Histories are full of the attempts of princes to dethrone the Lord's anointed. King John usurped the seat which belonged by right to Arthur ; King Henry the Fourth reigned through the deposition of Richard Second ; Richard Third had to cut ever so many rivals out of the way before he reached the throne. These ambitions are the springs on which the history moves.

Shakspeare discusses every aspect of the regal position ; and out of these plays there might easily be culled a book of maxims for those in authority :—

A sceptre snatched with an unruly hand  
Must be as boisterously maintained as gained,  
And he that stands upon a slippery place  
Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.

Let not the world see fear and sad distrust  
Govern the motion of a kingly eye.  
Be stirring as the time ; be fire with fire ;  
Threaten the threatener ; and outface the brow  
Of bragging horror. So shall inferior eyes,  
That borrow their behaviours from the great,  
Grow great by your example.

Treason is but trusted like the fox,  
Who, ne'er so tame, so cherished and locked up,  
Will have a wild trick of his ancestors.

When King John, aware of the unsoundness of his  
own title, resolved to be crowned a second time, a  
wise councillor said :

To be possessed with double pomp,  
To guard a title that was rich before,  
To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,  
To throw a perfume on the violet,  
To smooth the ice, or add another hue  
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light  
To seek the beautiful eye of heaven to garnish  
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.

When a king is asked whence he has obtained his

commission to fight in the quarrel of one who is being wronged, he answers nobly :

From that supernal Judge that stirs good thoughts  
In any breast of high authority  
To look into the blots and stains of right.

Those, however, who, whether by inheritance or by force, attained the coveted possession of the crown found that it was not all of velvet. It brought with it a thousand duties which, if performed, wore out the life prematurely and, being neglected, involved the land in confusion. Says a king :

O God, methinks it were a happy life  
To be no better than a homely swain :  
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,  
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,  
Thereby to see the minutes how they run ;  
When this is known, then to divide the times :  
So many hours must I tend my flock,  
So many hours must I take my rest,  
So many hours must I contemplate,  
So many hours must I sport myself ;  
So many days my ewes have been with young,  
So many weeks ere the poor fools will yearn,  
So many months ere I shall shear the fleece ;  
So minutes, hours, days, months and years,  
Passed over to the end they were created,  
Would bring white hairs into a quiet grave.



Ah what a life were this ! how sweet, how lovely !  
Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade  
To shepherds looking on their silly sheep  
Than doth a rich-embroidered canopy  
To kings that fear their subjects' treachery ?  
And, to conclude, the shepherd's homely curds,  
His cold, thin drink out of his leather bottle,  
His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade—  
All which secure and sweetly he enjoys—  
Is far beyond a prince's delicates,  
His viands sparkling in a golden cup,  
His body couched in a curious bed,  
When care, mistrust and treason wait on him.

And another far more strenuous king, worn out with labour and ceremony, thus apostrophizes sleep :

O sleep, O gentle sleep,  
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,  
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down  
And steep my senses in forgetfulness ?  
Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,  
Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,  
And hushed with buzzing nightflies to thy slumber,  
Than in the perfumed chambers of the great  
Under the canopies of costly state,  
And lulled with sounds of sweetest melody ?  
Wilt thou, upon the high and giddy mast,  
Seal up the shipboy's eyes, and rock his brains

In cradle of the rude, imperious surge,  
And in the visitation of the winds,  
Who take the ruffian billows by the top,  
Curling their monstrous heads and hanging them  
With deafening clamour in the slippery clouds,  
That, with the hurly, death itself awakes?  
Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose  
To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude  
And, in the calmest and most stillest night,  
Deny it to a king? Then, happy low-lie-down,  
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

The knightliest figure in Shakspeare is a deposed king. Richard the Second is the prey of favourites, wastes his substance and neglects his duties, till a rival, the shrewd and splendid Bolingbroke, profiting by his neglect, thrusts him from his seat. But, in the hour of humiliation, all the king awakens in Richard—not, indeed, the royal courage to reassert his claims, but the full sense of the dignity which he has lost, of the opportunities which he has thrown away, and of the God whom he has offended. He bends patiently beneath his heavy fate, as the storm of misfortune breaks over him; yet, as he goes to his doom, it is with steps more kingly than he has ever walked with before; and none of Shakspeare's kings in their glory affect us as does this one, when, almost mad with grief, he cries:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings—  
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed  
All murdered. For within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps death his court ; and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh, which walls-about our life,  
Were brass impregnable ; and, humoured thus,  
Comes at the last and, with a little pin,  
Bores through his castle-wall ; and—farewell king !  
Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood  
With solemn reverence ; throw away respect,  
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty ;  
For you have but mistook me all this while ;  
I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief,  
Need friends. Subjected thus,  
How can you say to me, I am a king ?

Yet it may be questioned whether there was in  
Richard the will to repent.

WAR.—In the period to which Shakspeare's Histories relate England was incessantly at war. There

were the wars with the French, sometimes on foreign soil and sometimes on the soil of England. Then there followed the Civil Wars, when the claims of the rival roses were being determined. Wherever war is taking place, it must move every section of society; and it was especially the absorbing interest of the classes with which Shakspeare chiefly concerned himself—the kings and the nobles. It was their trade and even their pastime; for the chief public entertainment was the mimic war of the tournament. Accordingly the pages of these Histories are crowded with war in all its phases. On the eve of an outbreak we hear the country ringing with the hammers of armourers and see the young men selling their all to buy a sword and a horse. Then, amidst sounds confused, the levies are shipped at the seaport; and now

behold the threaden sails,  
Borne with the invisible and creeping wind,  
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrowed sea,  
Breasting the lofty surge. Oh do but think  
You stand upon the rivage, and behold  
A city on the inconstant billows dancing,  
For so appears this fleet majesticl.

Then we see some French town approached from opposite sides by the contending armies, while the citizens tremble and their magistrates come out on the walls to carry on the difficult negotiations. Per-

haps the flags of war are folded up, the dispute being settled by a contract of marriage between two young people of the contending countries, whereon ensues the stately ceremonial of the wedding. Or, if the valour of the troops is put to the proof, then at last the English are carried back again to the shores of Albion, where the inhabitants await them on the white cliffs; and the conqueror passes on, to enter London in triumph. Shakspeare is very great in the description of pageants; and never does his verse move with a lighter measure than when he is picturing the crowds, the flags and the cheering for a victory.

But, while he unfolds all the splendour of his genius in depicting the glorious side of war, he is not forgetful of the other side—of the lives sacrificed, of the weeping mothers and widows, of the fields torn up and the country harried. Along with brave men there went to the French wars all the tag-rag-and-bobtail of the country; and multitudes, dishabituated to honest labour in the wars, became, when they returned home, the pests of the country. This class is depicted in Falstaff and his companions—the cowardly braggadocio Pistol, the fiery-faced Bardolph, the pot-valorous Nym and the rest.

As the type of those soldiering days we may take Harry Hotspur. This valiant dog-of-war never can get enough of fighting and marches to battle as gaily

as a maiden to a wedding. He delights in dogs and horses and, when on the back of a horse, feels that he is on his throne. When war is afoot, nothing can stay him—not even the dalliance of his lady wife:—

We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns  
And pass them current too.

He abhors a dandy, cannot be civil to a bore, and has no patience with poetry. He is irascible and downright, calling a spade a spade. When he is angry, nothing can stop the torrent of his words. He is generous and would give anything to a friend ;

But in the way of bargain, mark ye me,  
I'll cavil on the ninth part of a hair.

It is a thoroughly English and a thoroughly lovable type ; and we grieve as we see him falling beneath the stroke of a cooler hand.

CHARACTER.—Already it has been indicated with what variety of character these Histories are crowded ; but it still remains to note the chief efforts at character-painting.

The portraits of women in the Histories exhibit a singular monotony ; and the leading feature is a remarkable one. How far it may have been due to the impressions made on him by the study of the history out of which he obtained his materials, or how far it may have been due to memories and experiences of

his own in early life, we cannot tell ; but the conception of woman in the Histories is one of infinite sadness. The creed of the young author obviously was, that woman was made to mourn. In the three parts of *Henry the Sixth* and in *Richard the Third* there is a picture, drawn with great fulness of detail, of Queen Margaret ; and a terrible one it is. She begins life in the pride of beauty, high spirits and a great position. But her husband, the King, is a weakling, who can neither satisfy her heart nor fill his royal station ; and she becomes a guilty wife and a bold intriguer, scheming to maintain the position which is slipping from her. But disaster follows disaster : she loses her crown, her husband, her children, and her grandchildren, and sees her enemies exalted to the position which she has lost. As this goes on, she is transmuted into a fateful image of woe, not broken-down and penitent, but hardened, shrill and violent ; and at the last she moves through the scenes as a terrific shape—a prophetic hag, living wholly in the element of sorrow, but unsubdued by it and glorying in the misfortunes of others. The Lady Constance, in *King John*, is the same type on a somewhat smaller scale and with the colours more subdued. But still there is unearthly grief ; and her words are the outcome of a heart which is all one lake of tears. We gladly call to mind that at this period Shakspeare was able to create, side by side with these appalling figures, two such images of

female grace and loveliness as Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

While, however, drawing these somewhat weird pictures of women, Shakspeare, in the English Histories has painted his completest portrait of a man. This is the Prince Hal of the two parts of *Henry the Fourth* and the King Henry the Fifth of the drama which follows. In some respects this is the most perfect creation of Shakspeare's genius. Having three plays through which to develop the character, he builds it up slowly, exhibiting it fully in every phase; and he is obviously working with pleasure from beginning to end. In completing his portrait of Brutus in *Julius Cæsar* he says, through the mouth of one of the interlocutors :

His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world, This 'was a man ;

but, fine as the figure of Brutus is, this characterization is far truer of Prince Henry. If anyone wishes to know Shakspeare's conception of a man, here it is.

Tradition said that Henry the Fifth, after a wild and reckless youth, was sobered by having to assume the responsibility of the crown and thereafter ruled as an able and virtuous king. Following this suggestion, Shakspeare brings the Prince of Wales into contact



with loose and wild companions and, side by side with the dazzling world of the court and the camp, unveils a world of rascaldom, whose population consists of the dregs of the army floated home from the French wars, with women to match. These gentlemen are soldiers by profession, but, being out of employment, they are really adventurers of the lowest type, lodging in taverns and picking up a living in any way they can, not even disdaining purse-snatching or highway-robbery at a pinch.

Those who wish Shakspeare always to write as a philosopher have been exercised about the meaning of these scenes of low life, introduced in such violent contrast with the dignity of history; and they say that the intention is to caricature the real history. Up above, there is the world of royalty and chivalry, with its pomp and ceremony, where everyone is clothed in the glittering robes of dignity and everything is expressed in lofty language; but the dramatist, drawing a broad line beneath this picture, then, below this level of respectability, paints the picture of another world, where the clothing is, so to speak, taken off, men are seen as they really are, and everything is called by its plain name. The highway-robbery of these cutpurses, he means to say, is just the soldiering of the warriors of the great world with the gilt taken off; their coarse carnivals are the counterpart of the banquets and pageants of the upper world, only with

the ceremony laid aside and the human passions acknowledged. Their bullying and rhodomontade, though they disgust with their coarseness, contain in reality the same sentiments as the speeches of the champions of the tourney and the battlefield, whose words charm us with their eloquence. In this view there may be some truth, because many of the things done in these Histories in the name of chivalry and statesmanship are at heart grossly immoral; and, while lending to royalty and war the disguise of a splendid language, Shakspeare betrays here and there his sense that a great deal of the dignity is bunkum. No doubt he means also that the charm to Prince Hal, when he escaped from the court and the camp and joined his low associates, was to see human nature and human life as they really are, divested of the masks and cloaks of ceremony. But the poet's chief motive probably was the mere fun of the thing: he knew that his auditors wished to be amused; and, having struck upon this world of low life and found it entertaining, he pursued his discovery, and in one or two plays made it rather the picture, to which the real history serves as a frame, than the frame to the picture. Some of the scenes descend very low indeed; and young readers need to be warned not to linger on them, lest they be defiled.

Of this subterranean world of rascaldom the king is Sir John Falstaff, and he holds his court at the

tavern of Mrs. Quickly in Eastcheap. Falstaff is the greatest of Shakspeare's comic characters—the greatest comic character in English literature—the progenitor of an innumerable succession of such, down to the Sam Wellers and Dick Swivellers of recent days.

He is a mountain of a man, though, he tells Hal, "When I was about thy years, I could have crept into any alderman's thumb-ring: a plague of sighing and grief: it blows a man up like a bladder". He rules in the kingdom of the tavern; and its frequenters—the drinking, thieving, bragging ex-soldiers, the drawers and the women—worship him. His great distinction, however, is the observance of the Heir-apparent, to whom he performs the office discharged by the fool of yore in the courts of kings. He serves as a whetstone for the Prince's wit: "I am not only witty in myself," he says, "but the cause that wit is in other men"; and he treasures up fun for the Prince's entertainment. Thus, when he is with Justice Shallow in the country, he says: "I will devise matter enough out of this Shallow to keep Prince Harry in continual laughter the wearing-out of six fashions"; and he adds the shrewd remark: "Oh, it is much that a lie, with a slight oath, and a jest, with a sad brow, will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders".

He is a mighty swiller of liquor: "If I had a thousand sons, the first human principle I would teach them should be—to forswear thin potations and to

addict themselves to sack". He is a monstrous bragger: in the war he pretends to consider himself the pivot on which the whole action is turning: "There is not a dangerous action can peep out his head but I am thrust upon it. Well, I cannot last ever; but it was alway yet the trick of our English nation, if they have a good thing, to make it too common": though in the battle he turns out an arrant coward and, when danger approaches, lies down and feigns himself dead. He is deeply afflicted with impecuniosity: "I can get no remedy against this consumption of the purse; borrowing only lingers and lingers it out; but the disease is incurable". When, as an officer, he is sent to raise soldiers for the war, he fills his pockets by allowing those drafted to pay for substitutes, till he says: "Such have I, to fill up the rooms of them that have bought out their services, that you would think I had a hundred-and-fifty tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping. A mad fellow met me on the way and told me, I had unloaded all the gibbets and pressed the dead bodies. No eye hath seen such scare-crows; there is but a shirt and a half in all my company. I'll not march through Coventry with them, that's flat." He tells prodigious lies; and Harry's diversion is to egg him on to further and further exaggerations. But Jack knows well enough the fun he is causing by thus drawing the longbow, and he enjoys as much as anyone the jokes at his own expense.

There is a shrewdness in him almost amounting to wisdom, and he has the most dexterous way of getting out of scrapes. Thus, when the Prince, in the disguise of a drawer, overhears him undervaluing him to Doll Tearsheet and, throwing off the disguise, charges him with the treason, Jack has his answer ready: "I dispraised him before the wicked, that the wicked might not fall in love with him".

No scene could be funnier than when they agree that Falstaff should personate the King, Hal's father, and give the Prince a lecture on the wildness of his ways. As if he were on the throne, Jack begins: "Stand aside, nobility!" and, when the hostess utters an ejaculation, he says, with kingly pomp, "Weep not, sweet queen, for trickling tears are vain" and orders her to be led out of the presence. Then, turning to the Prince, he says: "Harry, I do not only marvel where thou spendest thy time, but also, how thou art accompanied. If thou be son to me, here lies the point—why, being son to me, art thou so pointed at? Shall the blessed sun of heaven prove a micher and eat blackberries?—a question not to be asked. Shall the Son of England prove a thief and take purses?—a question to be asked. There is a thing, Harry, which thou hast often heard of, and it is known to many in our land by the name of pitch: this pitch, as ancient writers do report, doth defile; so doth the company thou keepest: for, Harry, now I do not speak to thee

in drink, but in tears; not in pleasure, but in passion; not in words only, but in woes also. And yet there is a virtuous man whom I have often noted in thy company, but I know not his name. A goodly, portly man, i' faith, and a corpulent; of a cheerful look, a pleasing eye, and a most noble carriage; and, as I think, his age some fifty or, by'r lady, inclining to threescore; and, now I remember me, his name is Falstaff. If that man should be lewdly given, he deceiveth me; for, Harry, I see virtue in his looks. If, then, the tree may be known by his fruit, as the fruit by the tree, then—peremptorily I speak it—there is virtue in that Falstaff: him keep with, the rest banish."

Such is the world of low life into which Prince Henry, fleeing from the ceremonies of the court, loves to descend. But Shakspeare's representation is that, though in it, he is in nowise of it. He goes into it merely as a spectator, to gain acquaintance with real life, and is no more corrupted than the sun is by looking on a dunghill. When he was summoned out of it to take part in the civil war, he instantly answered to the summons; and, when he appeared in camp, one who saw him thus described him:—

I saw young Harry—with his beaver on,  
His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly armed—  
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,

And vaulted with such ease into his seat,  
As if an angel dropped down from the clouds,  
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus  
And witch the world with noble horsemanship.

He distinguished himself in the war; yet, after it was over, the attractions of low London drew him back again. His evil courses were a grief to his father, who spoke ominously of what might befall the nation under such a king; but other observers were more hopeful:—

You shall find, his vanities forespent  
Were but the outside of the Roman Brutus,  
Covering discretion with a coat of folly;  
As gardeners do with ordure hide those roots  
That shall first spring and be most delicate.

His father's death is the turning-point of his career. The dying king deals closely with him; and the Prince comes out of the death-chamber an altered man. At the same time the responsibility of kingship, descending on his head, steels his resolution. Falstaff, hearing in the country of the old king's death, hastens to town, thinking that his fortune is now made and squandering places and titles, by anticipation, among his comrades, and he salutes Harry in the old way, as he passes in procession through the street; but Harry cries:

I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers ;  
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester !

and forbids him on pain of death to come within ten miles of his person. For a moment Falstaff believes that this is but a jest, and that he will be sent for in private ; but he finds it to be sad earnest. And we are almost sorry for him, as we see him going away broken-hearted to his beggars' kingdom, from which the sun has been removed. He is allowed enough to live on ; but his circle scatters, his companions drifting asunder to their natural ends in the lazar-house or on the gallows. His own end soon ensues ; and the description of it, in the mouth of Mrs. Quickly, is a triumph of Shakspeare's art : "He made a fine end, and went away, an it had been any Christom child. After I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way ; for his nose was as sharp as a pen ; and a' babbled o' green fields." <sup>1</sup>

Harry, being settled on the throne, shoots up as a man of the most varied and perfect genius :—

Hear him but reason in divinity,  
And, all admiring, with an inward wish,  
You would desire the King were made a prelate ;  
Hear him debate of commonwealth affairs,

<sup>1</sup> Was Falstaff a coward ? Did King Henry treat him fairly ? On both questions see BRADLEY, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, pp. 263, 267, 268.



You'd say it hath been all-in-all his study ;  
List his discourse of war, and you shall hear  
A fearful battle rendered you in music ;  
Turn him to any cause of policy,  
The gordian knot of it he will unloose  
Familiar as his garter.

The most marked strain of his new character, however, is religion :—

The breath no sooner left his father's body  
But that his wildness, mortified in him,  
Seemed to die too ; yea, at that very moment,  
Consideration, like an angel came,  
And whipped the offending Adam out of him.

Henry the Fifth is the most deeply religious character in Shakspeare's works. His religion is not fanatical or obtrusive ; but it completely changes the course of his life ; and, ever after this date, with all his gay and manly temper there mingles, at every turn, the acknowledgment of God.

The culminating scene of his life is the Battle of Agincourt—one of Shakspeare's most wonderful performances. The English army, decimated with disease and hunger, creeps along the shore to Agincourt, while the French, with health, food and many times their numbers, prepare to sweep them into the sea. It seems a fatal moment ; but the King bates not a jot of heart or hope. One of the English leaders having

involuntarily expressed the wish that they had with them ten thousand more of their countrymen, Harry cries, "No, not a man more from England": he is certain that their cause is good, and that, with God's help, they can maintain it. We see the good fruit of his old habits of mixing with all sorts and conditions of men as, the night before the battle, he goes through the camp in disguise, talking as a brother-man with everyone; and, even in this hour of extremity, he cannot refrain from passing a practical joke on a bragging fool with whom he meets. At the breaking of the day he leads his troops to one of the most remarkable victories with which the name of England is adorned; and his own cheerfulness and valour supply the inspiration that puts hope into the hearts of his fainting men. When all is done, however, he knows nothing of his own heroism:—

O God, Thy arm was here,  
And not to us, but to Thy arm alone,  
Ascribe we all.

If Prince Harry's example is understood to advocate the "wild oats" theory of life, it is false and misleading; but, if it be taken to teach how one who has fallen into error, in the heat of young blood, may retrieve himself and, by the grace of God, rise to a full sense of the dignity of life, it has close affinity with the Gospel. I can never help thinking that in Prince Henry we

have a great deal of what Shakspeare himself was, and of what he wished to be. There is no doubt that Shakspeare knew by experience the world of madness and misrule over which he depicted Falstaff as presiding; because the life of actors and playwrights in his day bordered closely on rascaldom. Most of his brother-playwrights lived short and violent lives, and several of them perished in tavern-brawls. May we not take these dramas as indications that, though in this world, Shakspeare never liked it? At all events he rose out of it and quitted it. By incessant labour he clarified his genius and established his fortune; and may we not hope that, when, as the fruit of his toil, he became a prosperous man and, while still in the maturity of his powers, retired to his native Stratford, to spend the rest of his days far from the revelry of London, it was with King Harry's sense of deliverance from the errors of his youth and with his thankful consciousness of owing everything to God?



## THE ANCIENT HISTORIES

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA  
TIMON OF ATHENS  
CORIOLANUS  
JULIUS CÆSAR  
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA  
TITUS ANDRONICUS

## CHAPTER II.

### THE ANCIENT HISTORIES

THE first great effort of Shakspeare's genius was the series of plays founded on the history of his native country. But it was natural that, when this task was approaching completion, he, who had now perfectly acquired the art of dramatizing history, should turn, in search of subjects, to the history of other countries. And at that period, when the Revival of Learning had just given the literature of Greece and Rome as a fresh possession to the modern world, no foreign history was so likely to attract attention as that of classical antiquity.

Long before this stage, indeed, Shakspeare had glanced into that ancient region. His first play was *Titus Andronicus*, the personages of which were supposed to belong to the later Roman Empire. It is, indeed, doubtful how far this play really belongs to him. It is extremely unlike anything else which we know for certain to be his. There are in it a few striking lines and even passages of greater length; but, as a whole, it is an extremely crude performance, full of extravagant passages and unnatural crimes. In

short, the life it describes never was on sea or land, but only on the stage. If Shakspeare had any considerable hand in it, its principal interest lies in the evidence it affords of how, almost at a single bound, he afterwards passed beyond himself and beyond the style of his predecessors, whose turgid and blood-thirsty extravagances he had condescended for once to imitate.

Although *Titus Andronicus* is located in the Imperial Period, it has little or no connexion with actual history, its incidents being nearly all purely imaginary. Hence Coleridge has characterized it by the happy epithet of pseudo-classical. This name would apply also to another play, belonging to the dramatist's prime, *Troilus and Cressida*; which is founded on a love-story taken from the earliest Greek history and embodies some incidents of the Trojan War, but cannot be looked upon in any strict sense as an attempt to dramatize history. It is a curious piece and has an important value as a document in Shakspeare's personal history. It seems to have been written at a time when he was disgusted with life, and especially with the character of woman. He turns out the seamy side of everything, satirizing the Homeric heroes and exposing the brutality and cunning which underlay their chivalry and splendour. There are some great qualities in the play, side by side with others which are repulsive; but it has hardly a place in the



series of Histories. *Timon of Athens* would also be one of those Pseudo-classical Dramas, or it may be reckoned among the Tragedies. In it there is much of the disgust with life found in *Troilus and Cressida*, and it bears not a little resemblance to *Hamlet*.

The three plays on classical themes which distinctly belong to the category of Histories are *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cæsar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. These form the true continuation of the English Histories, and this is a hint which may guide the reader; though there was a long interval of time between the English and these Ancient Histories. All three were written at the height of the author's power, *Julius Cæsar* coming next after *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* immediately after *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. All three, it will be observed, belong to Roman history; Shakspeare has no play of the same species taken from the history of Greece.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast with the pseudo-classical plays, these derive their materials directly from history, with only limited invention of character or incident for poetical effect. The source from which Shakspeare chiefly obtained his information was a recently executed

<sup>1</sup> All the plays discussed in this chapter appear in the First Folio among the Tragedies. As for *Troilus and Cressida*, the editors themselves seem to have been uncertain where to place it; and no wonder; for, as has been said, it is "a History in which historical verisimilitude is openly set at nought, a Comedy without genuine laughter, a Tragedy without pathos".

translation of Plutarch, the celebrated biographer of antiquity, who wrote the lives of the most distinguished personages of the ancient world, both Greek and Roman. In the more learned editions of the plays the narrative of Plutarch is usually printed in the introduction, that the student may see to what extent the modern author was indebted to it; and no one can compare the two versions of the events—the ancient and the modern, the prosaic and the poetical—without being struck with the closeness, almost slavishness, with which the playwright adheres to his authority. Thus in *Julius Cæsar* (to quote the remarks of Gervinus, the German Shakspearian commentator) not only the historical action in general, but single incidents and speeches are taken from Plutarch, nay, even such details as one unacquainted with the ancient biographer would consider in form and manner to be quite Shakspearean: the omens of Cæsar's death, the warnings of the augur and of Artemidorus, the absence of the heart in the animal sacrificed, Calphurnia's dream, the peculiar traits of Cæsar's character, his remarks about thin people like Cassius, the circumstance that in the conspiracy no oath was taken, the withdrawal of Cicero, the relation of Portia to Brutus, her temptation, her words, his reply, her subsequent anxiety and death; the circumstances of Cæsar's death, the means taken by Decius Brutus to induce him to leave home, the behaviour of Antony, the murder of

the poet Cinna ; further on, the contention of the Republican leaders concerning Lucius Pella, their conversation about suicide, the apparition of the ghost of Cæsar, the mistakes in the battle, its double issue, the suicide of Cassius by the same sword with which he had killed Cæsar—all are taken from Plutarch's narrative, from which the poet had only to omit whatever would have destroyed the unity of the action.

Such wholesale literary appropriation—and I have omitted some of the details enumerated by Gervinus—takes away one's breath. Never was there so magnificent a thief as Shakspeare. The mere skeleton of a play he laid hands on wherever he could find it. But all the more wonderful on this account must appear the magic-touch with which everything thus appropriated is made his own and the creative power with which he is able to clothe the skeleton with flesh and beauty, and breathe into it the breath of life.

Shakspeare, as Ben Jonson, the scholar, has recorded, knew little Latin and less Greek. In short, his acquaintance with the ancient world must have been acquired almost, if not altogether, through translations. Yet the atmosphere of the classical ages, which other men learn to feel by long years of study, was so perfectly caught by him, with the childlike instinct of genius, that, scholars have to allow, it could not have been better reproduced even by the most learned. He falls, indeed, into superficial blunders, as when he

makes one of the Trojan heroes speak of Aristotle or one of the characters in *Coriolanus* mention Cato ; but it may be doubted whether he was not himself aware of these anachronisms ; and it is infinitely easier to be correct in such trifles than accurately to reproduce the spirit of the ancient world.

Perhaps this Roman stamp is most distinctly felt in *Coriolanus*. The characters have the force, the individuality and the severe simplicity of ancient sculpture. As you read, you feel how natural it was that this race should have descended from brothers who were suckled by a wolf ; that it should have produced men like Curtius and Cato and women like Lucretia and Cornelia ; that the tramp of its legions should have shaken the world ; that its military roads, uniting country to country, should have been so constructed that they have lasted to the present day ; and that its system of law should have laid the ground-work of all modern legislation.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* the mighty force of Rome is also everywhere felt ; but the atmosphere is not so distinctively Roman. The prodigal and magnificent manhood of the hero masters the author and runs away with him, so that he forgets the Roman in the man ; and he departs more from the literal record than in the other plays. Coleridge says of *Antony and Cleopatra* that it ranks with the four great tragedies ; and well may he say so ; for the power, accumul-

ating as it proceeds, rises in the last two acts into overwhelming sublimity.

*Julius Cæsar* is, however, the most perfect of these three plays. Its art has, indeed, been objected to, because it is a question who is the hero—whether Julius Cæsar, after whom it is named, or Brutus. I have heard a German Shakspeare Society discuss this question for hours, when the orators were hidden in clouds of tobacco-smoke, and the arguments were washed down with rivers of bad beer. But, whatever may be said on such a technical point, this is one of the few plays in which Shakspeare exhibits all the resources of a perfect workman. *Antony and Cleopatra* has a keener human interest and displays a more gigantic power; but it exhibits also a giant's violence and lack of control; the material strays about like an unkept wood; and there are portions which only retard and obscure the movement of the whole. But in *Julius Cæsar* everything superfluous is pruned away. It is as if the poet had loved his work and gone over it again and again, giving the finishing touches, as a sculptor does to his statue. In *Coriolanus* the thought is frequently obscure; you feel as if you were reading a corrupt text; the interior heat is not intense enough to raise the meaning into relief. But in *Julius Cæsar* such is the intensity of the poetic inspiration that the language is resonant, the thought clearly intelligible, and the movement swift and sure from the first page

to the last. Nowhere else, even in Shakspeare, do you come upon more passages which you would like to quote. In respect of perfection of execution *Julius Cæsar* among the Histories ranks with *Macbeth* among the Tragedies and the *Merchant of Venice* among the Comedies; but it excels both. I do not say, by any means, that it is the greatest of Shakspeare's plays; but it is the most perfect; and, if one wished to tempt anyone who had read nothing of Shakspeare, this would be the play to place in his hands.

In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Cæsar* Shakspeare has chosen for illustration two of the critical moments of Roman history—the one the point, in early ages, when aristocracy was passing into democracy, the other the point, in later times, at which the republic was passing into the empire. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a kind of appendix to *Julius Cæsar*: and in it the political situation is unchanged. These plays being thus derived from junctures of history when opposite political principles were in violent collision, it might be natural to expect in them the discussion of the rival theories of government. And in *Coriolanus* at all events, it might be maintained, this expectation is realised.

History says that, in the earliest ages, Rome was ruled first by kings and then by an oligarchy. But the common people fretted under the government of the

nobles and claimed a share in the management of the state which they had helped to create. At last their complaints were rendered so urgent and ominous by the pinch of famine that the nobles had to a certain extent to give way : officers, named tribunes, were created to watch over the interests of the common people, whose voice was also declared to be necessary before the consuls, the highest officers of state, could be duly elected. Of these changes Coriolanus is the bitter opponent ; in him is concentrated the arrogant tradition of the aristocracy. He hates the common people and ridicules their tribunes.

Shakspeare gives him full scope. Coriolanus calls the common people to their faces curs and geese, scabs and measles of the state ; they are “ the mutable, rank-scented many ” ; their tribunes are tritons among the minnows ; when they are perishing of hunger, he dissents from the vote of the senate to give them free corn :—

They say there's grain enough.

Would the nobility lay aside their ruth  
And let me use my sword, I'd make a quarry  
With thousands of these quartered slaves, as high  
As I could pick my lance.

He argues with intense conviction that there cannot be two masters in the state :—

My soul aches  
To know, when two authorities are up,  
Neither supreme, how soon confusion  
May enter 'twixt the gap of both, and take  
The one by the other.

The people, being by far the more numerous of the parties in the state, will have the bigger poll; and, if wisdom cannot act without waiting on the yea or nay of ignorance, it must omit real necessities, and nothing will be done to purpose.

But Shakspeare introduces a far keener reasoner on the same side in Menenius Agrippa. Menenius is as thorough an aristocrat as Coriolanus, but has far more coolness and shrewdness. Unlike Coriolanus, he has no dislike to mingle with common men, though he has quite as little faith in their virtues. He does not, like Coriolanus, denounce the tribunes, but unmercifully chaffs them—taking the coats of office, so to speak, off their backs and showing what mechanic souls are hidden within them. Here is Shakspeare's rendering of his famous fable of the Stomach and the Members: Menenius is surrounded by an angry mob of mutinous citizens, whom he is endeavouring to quiet; and he says:

I shall tell you  
A pretty tale; it may be you have heard it;  
But, since it serves my purpose, I will venture  
To state it a little more.



A citizen interrupts: "Well, I'll hear it, sir; yet you must not think to fob-off our disgrace with a tale; but, an't please you, deliver".

Menenius resumes:

There was a time when all the body's members  
Rebelled against the belly: thus accused it:  
That only like a gulf it did remain  
I' the midst of the body, idle and unactive,  
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing  
Like labour with the rest; where the other instruments

Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,  
And, mutually participate, did minister  
Unto the appetite and affection common  
Of the whole body. The belly answered—

"Well, sir," interrupts a too eager listener, "what answer made the belly?"

Menenius resumes:

Sir, I shall tell you. With a kind of smile,  
Which never came from the lungs, but even thus—  
For, look you, I may make the belly smile  
As well as speak—it tauntingly replied  
To the discontented members, the mutinous parts  
That envied his receipt; even so most fitly  
As you malign our senators for that  
They are not such as you.

Here a too impatient citizen interrupts:

Your belly's answer? What!

The kingly-crowned head, the vigilant eye,

The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier,

Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter,

With other muniments and petty helps

In this our fabric, if that they . . . . .

. . . . .

Should by the cormorant belly be restrained,

Who is the sink of the body . . . . .

. . . . . if they did complain

What could the belly answer?

Menenius replies :

I will tell you,

If you'll bestow a small—of what you've little—

Patience a while, you'll hear the belly's answer.

"Ye're long about it," interjects a listener ; but Menenius proceeds :

Note me this, good friend,

Your most grave belly was deliberate,

Not rash like his accusers, and thus answered,

True is it, my incorporate friends, quoth he,

That I receive the general food at first,

Which you do live upon ; and fit it is,

Because I am the storehouse and the shop

Of the whole body ; but, if you do remember,

I send it through the rivers of your blood,

Even to the court, the heart—to the seat o' the brain

And, through the cranks and offices of man,

The strongest nerves and small inferior veins  
From me receive that natural competency  
Whereby they live : and, though that all at once,  
You, my good friends—this says the belly, mark me,  
“Ay, sir,” interrupts an interested auditor. “well,  
well?”

Though all at once cannot  
See what I do deliver out to each,  
Yet I can make my audit up, that all  
From me do back receive the flour of all,  
And leave me but the bran. What say you to’t?  
“It was,” responds the citizen “an answer, how apply  
you this?”

Menenius proceeds :

The senators of Rome are this good belly,  
And you the mutinous members ; for, examine  
Their counsels and their cares ; digest things rightly  
Touching the weal o’ the common, you shall find,  
No public benefit which you receive  
But it proceeds or comes from them to you,  
And no way from yourselves. What do you think,  
You, the great toe of this assembly—

(pointing to a loquacious citizen, who indignantly re-  
torts :)

“I the great toe? why the great toe?”

The orator replies :

For that being one o' the lowest basest, poorest  
Of this most wise rebellion, thou goest foremost,  
Thou rascal, that are worst in blood to run,  
Lead'st first to win some vantage.  
Rome and her rats are at the point of battle ;  
The one side must have bale.

This speech will call to mind the far greater one in *Julius Cæsar*, in which Antony, over the corpse of the murdered Julius, stirs up the hearts of the populace to mutiny and so works upon them that they, who were on the side of Brutus and the conspirators, cry out for their death and rush about the street in frenzy, calling for blood and fire.

It can be asserted with truth, I think, that in these Roman plays Shakspeare not only introduces characters who look down upon the people, but himself exposes their weaknesses. He dwells with special severity on their inconstancy. An adroit tongue like Antony's can turn them to anything ; and changes of fortune depress or elate them, to one thing constant never. The fickleness of the mob might, in fact, almost be called the theme of *Coriolanus*.

On the other hand, the dramatist exhibits with equal impartiality the weakness of the opposite side. If the fickleness of the mob might, with a stretch, be called the motive of this play, the judgment of arrogance, the darling vice of aristocracy, is its obvious subject.

Coriolanus has all the virtues of his class. He is devoted to his family and proud of his country. He has personal distinction, strength, courage and the power of evoking enthusiasm. He is the kind of man who could save a kingdom in an emergency and produce panic in the ranks of its enemies. But he is devoured by arrogance—pride of self and pride of his class. In nothing is this more visible than in his dislike of praise: he depreciates his own services and cannot endure to have a word said about his merits; but this is only the sensitiveness of a spirit too proud to endure any familiarity. His arrogance assumes the form of a savage contempt of the common people. While his achievements have made him the natural candidate for the highest office in the state, he cannot become consul without the consent of the common people, and to sue for their favour he cannot endure. When at last he is persuaded to do so, he insults the electors instead of petitioning them; and his insane behaviour culminates in a tumult, in which he is banished from the city. So deeply offended is he that he goes and allies himself with the Volscians, the deadly enemies of Rome, and, at the head of their army, returns to take vengeance on his ungrateful country. Such is the unnatural position into which he is brought by inhuman arrogance. But nature obtains her revenge; for his mother, with his wife and child, goes out to meet him at the gates of the city, and, under her entreaties, his resolution breaks

down. Abandoning the expedition, he returns with the Volscians to their capital, but only to perish in an outbreak occasioned by his fickle conduct. No man is so great that he can afford to live to himself alone ; the most brilliant gifts may only procure their owner's ruin, unless, united with them, be the saving grace of charity. Such is the moral of *Coriolanus*.

If the purpose of Shakspeare's writings were to illustrate political principles, we should expect to find in *Julius Cæsar* a discussion of the rival claims of Republicanism and Imperialism ; for this was the issue involved in the conflicts which it describes. We do also find in the play indications of this fact. Cæsar is an impersonation of arbitrary power, not very worthily conceived, falling far beneath the Julius Cæsar of actual history. Brutus, on the other hand, is the embodiment of republican principles : he is sincerely attached to the tradition of the past and cannot endure to see his country enslaved to Cæsar's ambition. But Shakspeare is far less concerned about the rightness and wrongness of the political creed of Brutus than with the loyalty of his hero to what he believes. Brutus is one of the prime favourites of the dramatist ; next to Henry the Fifth, he may be called his ideal of manhood ; but it is not with his political principles but with the purity and completeness of his character as a man that Shakspeare is concerned.

If there is any political principle which may be said

to be embodied in this play, it is neither Republicanism nor Imperialism, but what may be called the Destiny of the State. Political institutions are neither good nor bad in themselves: they are only good or bad according to circumstances. They are not intended to last forever, but are subject to the law of mutability, which plays so vast a part in human things. The Roman state began with kings and passed on through aristocracy and republicanism to imperialism. Coriolanus's life was a desperate attempt to stop this evolution at an early stage and keep things forever as they had been; but the law at the heart of things is mightier than the will of any individual; and accordingly the evolution proceeded, while Coriolanus, strong as he was, was swept aside.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, when the period depicted in the other play had come, the republican stage of the state, having done its work, was ready to be superseded. It had raised problems which it could not solve and created forces which it could not control. One strong man was needed to take all the threads into his hand and give to Rome's far-extended conquests the unity which the republic could not impress on the vanquished world. Julius

<sup>1</sup> Whose course will on  
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs  
Of more strong link asunder than can ever  
Appear in your impediment.

Cæsar seemed to be the man; but Brutus threw himself in the way, resolved to turn back the wheels of change. He succeeded so far as to thwart the ambition of Cæsar; but he could not alter the course of destiny: the wheels which he attempted to stop passed over himself and crushed him, as they went.

His motives are of the highest, but his enterprise contains within itself from the beginning the seeds of failure. More than he is aware, he is the tool of Cassius, his fellow-conspirator, whose motives are far from being equally pure. Cassius is inflamed not with zeal for his country's freedom, but with envy that anyone should be greater than himself; as Caesar threatens to be. Of Cæsar he says:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world  
 Like a Colossus; and we petty men  
 Walk under his huge legs, and peep about  
 To find ourselves dishonourable graves.

Cæsar had noted the envy of this man and was afraid of it:—

Let me have about me men that are fat,  
 Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights.  
 Yond Cassius hath a lean and hungry look,  
 He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.

. . . . .



Would he were fatter!—but I fear him not ;  
Yet, if my name were liable to fear,  
I do not know the man I should avoid  
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much,  
He is a great observer, and he looks  
Quite through the deeds of men ; he loves no plays,  
As thou dost, Antony ; he hears no music ;  
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort  
As if he mocked himself, and scorned his spirit  
That could be moved to smile at anything.  
Such men as he be never at heart's ease  
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves ;  
And therefore are they very dangerous.

When Cæsar was murdered, Cassius wished Antony to be sacrificed too, but Brutus would not hear of it : he was too noble to make use of the means necessary to accomplish the end he had in view. Those who rallied to his standard were too like himself—dreamy and visionary, men of the closet rather than of the camp, as is indicated by a poet rushing into the general's tent with his advice on the eve of battle. Worst of all, the cause, which was holy in the eyes of Brutus, had at the outset been stained with murder ; and this disturbed his conscience, as is indicated by the spectre of the assassinated Cæsar, which appeared in his tent and warned him that he would meet him again at Philippi. The attempt to restore the republic failed,

and Brutus perished along with the cause of which he had constituted himself the champion. The reasons of his failure are indicated in detail in the play ; but the true cause is rather in the atmosphere than actually expressed : it was that the hour had come.

If the political motive can be admitted only in a modified sense in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Cæsar*, the psychological interest comes clearly into predominance in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The political movement is, indeed, still going on : the republic is passing away, and its enormous possessions are steadily and inevitably accumulating in the hands of Octavius, who, though not the ablest of the competitors for them, yet, by his self-control and perseverance, proved himself to be the man whom the times required. From another point of view this play may be held to illustrate another momentous feature of the age—namely, how Rome, though she conquered the East, was herself conquered by Eastern magnificence and luxury. But it is the great character of Antony which fascinates Shakspeare ; and on its delineation he expends an almost superhuman power.

Antony already plays a leading part in the play of *Julius Cæsar*. Reference has been made to the extraordinary speech with which he detached the populace of Rome from the cause of the conspirators ;

and he was one of the leaders by whom Brutus and Cassius were defeated at Philippi.

The Roman world, which Julius Cæsar had all but made his own, fell, at his death into the hands of three men—Antony, Octavius and Lepidus. But, in the nature of things, it had ultimately to become the property of one of the three; and the question was, which of them was to be the favourite of destiny. Lepidus had little chance: he was a weak man and a drunkard: this is how Antony and Octavius speak of him, when they are alone together:—

This is a slight, unmeritable man,  
Meet to be sent on errands: is it fit,  
The threefold world divided, he should stand  
One of the three to share it?

Though we lay these honours on this man,  
To ease ourselves of divers slanderous loads,  
He shall but bear them as an ass bears gold,  
To groan and sweat under the business,  
Either led or driven, as we point the way;  
And, having brought our treasure where we will,  
Then take we down his load and turn him off,  
Like to the empty ass, to shake his ears  
And graze in commons.

The chances of Octavius were better, though his powers were not brilliant. But Antony appeared to be the

man. Pompey says of him, "His soldiership is twice the other twain". Of his great past even Octavius, his rival, confesses :

Antony, when thou once  
Wast beaten from Modena, where thou slewest  
Hirtius and Pansa, consuls, at thy heel  
Did famine follow ; whom thou foughtst against,  
Though daintily brought up, with patience more  
Than savages could suffer . . . . .  
. . . . . thy palate then did deign  
The roughest berry on the rudest hedge ;  
Yea, like a stag, when snow the pasture sheets,  
The bark of trees thou browsedst ; on the Alps,  
It is reported, thou didst eat strange flesh,  
Which some did die to look on ; and all this  
Was borne so like a soldier that thy cheek  
So much as lanked not.

Agrippa said of him : "A rarer spirit never did steer humanity".

After Cæsar's death the third part of the world was his ; and the chances were more than even that he might win the whole. But, when the play called by his name opens, he is in Egypt, bound captive by his unlawful passion for Cleopatra, the queen of that country. They are passing their time in lust and revelry, and he has forgotten home, honour and fortune. His affairs urgently require his presence in Italy, where

his rivals are profiting by his absence ; but he cannot drag himself away from the sensual styte in which he is wallowing.

At last he hears of his wife's death and, by a desperate effort, quits Egypt and appears in Italy. Here he soon picks up the threads of his affairs and takes his proper place. He renews his alliance with Octavius by marrying his sister. But, in no long time, the fatal spell drags him back to Egypt again. The deserted Octavia returns to her brother, who at once prepares for revenge ; and to revenge Octavia is at the same time to grasp Antony's share of the Roman world. They meet at the battle of Actium, where Cleopatra accompanies Antony, confusing his brain and thwarting his counsels by her presence. In the height of the action she suddenly takes to flight ; whereupon he,

like a doting mallard,

Leaving the fight in height, flies after her.

When he has time to reflect, he is overwhelmed with shame and remorse ; but, as soon as Cleopatra rejoins him, he is quickly comforted and pronounces her kiss or one of her tears to be worth all that is won or lost.

Octavius pursues the pair to Alexandria, where Antony, turning at bay, fights so desperately that for one day fortune promises to crown him with victory. But the voluptuary, thus encouraged, abandons himself, even in this crisis, to his passion :—

Come,  
Let's have one other gaudy night ; call to me  
All my sad captains, fill our bowls once more ;  
Let's mock the midnight bell.

The next day the ships of Cleopatra desert in the midst of the battle, and all is lost. Antony sees that she, who has so long vowed to him infinite love, has betrayed him, and he curses her false heart in the terms it deserves. There is for him only one way of escape from the intolerable humiliation of being led through Rome at the wheel of Octavius' car of triumph ; and, as with his own hand he gives away his life, it is with the horrible conviction that she for whom he has sacrificed everything—duty, empire and life itself—is about to cast herself into the arms of his rival. Yet even at this point his infatuation returns : the suicidal blow having been so awkwardly inflicted as not to terminate his life at once, he crawls once more to Cleopatra's feet and dies begging for one last kiss.

It is an awful picture of the infatuation of passion and its fatal consequences. Antony is the Prodigal Son of Shakspeare's works, but a prodigal who never comes home.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> When our viciousness grows hard—  
Oh misery on't !—the wise gods seal our eyes ;  
In our own filth drop our clear judgments ;  
Make us adore our errors ; laugh at's, while we strut  
To our confusion.

From the rich materials accumulated in these three dramas many other features might be selected.

For example, the prevalence of suicide is noteworthy. An extraordinary number of the characters terminate their existence with their own hands. Even Brutus, who expresses himself as opposed to suicide on principle, resorts to it when his affairs appear to be in desperation. This was the Roman way; and it is a characteristic trait of heathenism, in which the sense of responsibility for life was imperfectly developed.

Another outstanding feature is the regard paid to omens. Where faith in the loving providence of God is undeveloped, superstition seizes eagerly on any hints by which the will of the gods and the secrets of the future may be supposed to be indicated; and the demand for these signs brings forth the supply. Events like the death of Cæsar were supposed to be portended by signs in the heavens and unusual disturbances in the frame of the world; and Shakspeare renders these rumours with weird sublimity.

A feature which these ancient historical plays possess, in common with the modern ones, is a fondness for pageants. To Shakspeare nothing is more congenial than to describe a holiday, when some great general returns from the wars, and the city pours itself into the streets to meet him, the onlookers swarming up posts and crowding roofs, windows and other

coigns of vantage, while the enthusiasm of a common joy pervades all classes.

There are many of the minor characters of these plays which well deserve particular analysis. But we will restrict ourselves to a closing notice of the remarkable group of women they contain.

First, there is Volumnia, the mother of Coriolanus, "the she-wolf," as Heine calls her, "who suckled the wolf Caius Marcius with her milk of iron". "When he was yet tender-bodied," she says, "and the only son of my womb ; when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way ; when, for a day of kings' entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding ; I—considering how honour should become such a person ; that was no better than picture-like to hang by the wall, if renown made it not stir—was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him ; from whence he returned his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. Hear me profess sincerely : had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than my good Marcius, I had rather have eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action." She had instilled into him the pride of his manhood and the pride of his class ; and he had learned the lesson too well. When



his career was like to be wrecked because he would not condescend to canvass the common people, she had to entreat him to pocket his pride, and she even stooped to urge him to dissemble, arguing that it was no more base, for the attainment of a noble end, to use the art of dissimulation in the contests of peace than to employ stratagem, as he was wont to do, in the conduct of war. Her power over him, whom no one else could manage, was proved when, at the gates of Rome, she turned him back from his purpose; but she had to expiate what had been unnatural in his training by hearing immediately of his death at the hands of the Volscians.

Shakspeare loves to present characters in contrast; and no more striking contrast is possible than that between Coriolanus's mother and his wife, Valeria. The latter is such a woman as Thackeray loved to paint: a woman without words—"my gracious silence" Coriolanus calls her—despised by her own sex as destitute of spirit; wholly absorbed in her home, her husband, her son; full of tenderness, tremors and tears; yet a perfect woman, benign, modest, beautiful and able to satisfy and enthrall the heart of a strong man.

It is a marvellous evidence of the variety which Shakspeare was able to impart to characters fundamentally alike that between the savage virtue of Volumnia on the one hand and the shrinking tenderness of Valeria on the other he could create a figure like

Portia, the wife of Brutus. She is the true Roman matron—strong and dignified, fit to participate in all the secrets of her husband and able to assert her own rights, yet watching over his life and honour like a guardian angel, dissolved in anxieties, when he is in danger, and no longer able to sustain the burden of life, when he is taken from her. If Volumnia is the image of the stern qualities by which in the earliest ages the Roman state was built up, it is because in its greatest days there were at Rome wives and mothers like Portia that the stamp of Rome upon the world is indelible, and the Roman name remains forever a synonym for manliness and righteousness.

The whole diameter of being separates such women from Cleopatra, the voluptuous daughter of the East, the swart queen of Egypt, the serpent of old Nile, as Antony calls her. In comparison with them she is but a glorious weed; yet she arrests the eye, like a poppy among corn; and on her portraiture the dramatist lavishes all the resources of his art.

Antony is not the first whom she has fascinated. The divine Cæsar himself had been ensnared by her charms, and so had Pompey the Great. But

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety; other women cloy  
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.

Would you know how she captured Antony at their first meeting? She went to meet him at Tarsus :

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Burned on the water ; the poop was beaten gold ;  
Purple the sails and so perfumed that  
The winds were love-sick with them ; the oars were  
silver,

Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made  
The water which they beat to follow faster,  
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,  
It beggared all description ; she did lie  
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature : on each side her  
Stood pretty, dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,  
With diverse-coloured fans, whose wind did seem  
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool  
And what they undid did.

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,  
So many mermaids, tended her i' the eyes  
And made their bends adornings ; at the helm  
A seeming mermaid steers ; the silken tackle  
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands.

And so forth. In short, she carried Antony off to her palace in Egypt, where she confounded his senses with such a succession of never-ending pleasures that he completely abandoned to her both his heart and

his fate. When they went to fish, she would have divers under water, to affix the trout to his hook. She would put her "tires and mantles" on him and gird on herself "his sword Philippan". A thousand diversions she could invent; and, as his passion rose, she could meet it with its equal, or with arts of hesitancy and coyness which only inflamed it the more. Her sole object was to keep him beside her in Egypt, and as far as possible from Rome, where his duties lay. When he leaves her, she is distracted with passion and sends a score of letters after him every day; when she hears of his marriage to Octavia, she is mad with rage and jealousy, till she is informed that her rival is small in stature, plain in appearance and cold in disposition—in short, one whom she has no fear of outdazzling. Her anticipations prove too correct; for Antony soon returns to Circe's pen.

There is not in Cleopatra a single noble thought. She squanders the resources of Egypt and loves to have her messages carried by kings; yet at a pinch she can stoop to lying and even theft in money-matters. When the ring of fate closes about Antony, and his fall is inevitable, she deserts him and entertains designs on the heart of his conqueror, the cool Octavius. Yet at the last moment—and here is Shakspeare's wonderful knowledge of human nature—she discovers that her love is far deeper than she has been aware; and she is actually at the same

moment both betraying Antony and loving him so passionately as to be able to die with him. Of such contradictions is the heart of woman capable.

There are few passages in all literature so impressive as those closing scenes in which, turning away from her traitorous bargaining for her own life, she at last realises what is the real state of her heart, and learns that she is

No more but e'en a woman, and commanded  
By such poor passion as the maid that milks  
And does the meanest chares.

All the greatness of Antony comes back on her; and she declares that, he being gone, "there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon".

The officers of Octavius, who intend to adorn his triumph by exhibiting her to the gaze of Rome, have hemmed her in; but she eludes their vigilance and gets a number of asps conveyed into the tower in which she is confined, by a countryman carrying a basket of grapes. That is a wonderful scene, when she tells her women to array her once more in all the splendour of her royal robes and, thus attired, applies the reptile to her breast, bidding it be angry and dispatch, and with its sharp teeth the "knot intricate of life untie". The murderous bite she declares to be "as sweet as balm, as soft as air"; and, smiling in reply to a pitying exclamation of her attendant, she says:

Peace, peace,  
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,  
That sucks the nurse asleep?

When all is over, the waiting-woman adjusts on the dead queen's head the crown, which has fallen a little awry, and then, applying to her own breast another of the reptiles, follows her mistress into the unknown.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Heine, who knew this kind of woman too well, has a chapter on Cleopatra, in his *Shakspeare's Maidens and Women*, which makes the reader shiver with its realism and unearthly cleverness.

THE GAYER COMEDIES

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST  
THE COMEDY OF ERRORS  
TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA  
A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM  
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE  
THE TAMING OF THE SHREW  
THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR  
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING  
AS YOU LIKE IT  
TWELFTH NIGHT OR WHAT YOU WILL



## CHAPTER III.

### THE GAYER COMEDIES

SHAKSPEARE made himself by the historical plays, and these form the true gateway into the world of his thought. But even earlier than the working of this enriching vein the composition of his earliest Comedies had begun ; and, during the first half of his life as an author, the writing of historical plays and the making of comedies went on side by side. Indeed, the composition of comedies went on during his entire life as a dramatist ; and the Comedies number nearly half of all his plays. The audience in a theatre wants primarily to be amused, and the dramatist has to give what the public asks. The Comedies formed part of the day's work which Shakspeare had to perform, although there is far less of the man himself in them than in the historical plays.

It is generally allowed that there is a marked contrast between the comedies of Shakspeare's earlier and those of his later life. The former are gayer, the latter graver ; and the date fixed upon as the watershed is the year 1600. Up to this date he wrote ten comedies, the names of which are printed on the opposite page, and these form the theme of the present chapter.

Among the learned there has been a great deal of discussion about what Comedy is ; and the different theories are far from uninteresting ; but, when we are dealing with Gayer Comedies, there can be little difficulty in determining what their object is. It is to excite laughter.

Man is said to be the only animal that can laugh ; and it is a precious privilege. As the Scripture says, "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine". It is a kind of piquant and titillating sauce, appointed by Nature to be taken along with the daily bread of work, which would otherwise be too dry and indigestible. It is a kind of sunshine, which imparts buoyancy to the step and prevents the journey of life from becoming too tedious. It is a power imparted to human beings in very varying degrees. As one of these Gayer Comedies says,

now, by two-headed Janus,  
Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time—  
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes  
And laugh like parrots at a bagpiper ;  
And others of such vinegar aspect,  
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile,  
Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.

To laugh well, however, requires a good deal of wisdom. It is possible to laugh too much—it doeth good, says Solomon, "like a medicine"—that is, when

taken now and then, with plenty of work and other kinds of seriousness in between—but to feed on medicine would be a perilous experiment. Another secret of the wisdom of laughter lies in laughing at the right things and not at the wrong ones. And we may take as the guide to the wisdom of Shakspeare in this part of his writings the question—What are the things at which he makes us laugh?

In these plays there are figures introduced which have been expressly created for the purpose of provoking laughter. These are the Fools, of whom Touchstone, in *As You Like It*, is perhaps the most distinguished. In the Age of Chivalry there was attached to the establishment of lords and ladies a professional fool, who wore motley and cap and bells. He was a privileged character, who was allowed to say anything to anybody. He went about making jokes on the business of life, as a clown does on the business of a circus ; but, if he happened to be a man of shrewdness and sense, he might be a true teacher, because he was permitted to utter unpalatable truths. As Shakspeare says, “he uses his folly like a stalking-horse, and, under the presentation of that, he shoots his wit”. And elsewhere the poet says :

This fellow's wise enough to play the fool ;  
And to do that well craves a kind of wit ;  
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,

The quality of persons, and the time ;  
Not, like the haggard,<sup>1</sup> check at every feather  
That comes before his eye. This is a practice  
As full of labour as a wise man's art.

"Full of labour" he calls the business of the fool ; and it must be confessed that to us now at all events it is a laborious task to follow the fooling of these plays. It turns to a large extent on puns and other plays upon words, which no doubt were easily comprehended by the first hearers, but now require as much commenting as obscure passages in the classics. There are pages upon pages on which the light of wit must once have shone as brightly as the morning sunshine on the drops of dew ; but time has rendered them as dry as sand and as opaque as clay. You may with great labour master every difficulty ; but in nine cases out of ten the game is not worth the candle.

There are other figures on a level with the fools—such, for example, as the Men's Men. When a young gentleman goes forth from home on his travels, he is always accompanied by a confidential servant, who not only fetches and carries for him, and assists him in every kind of adventure, but also plays the fool for his amusement. Of these one or two, like the immortal Launce in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, who is always accompanied by his dog Crab, are still

<sup>1</sup> Untrained hawk.

amusing; but the wit of most of them has fallen, through the lapse of time, into a woefully withered condition, consisting as it does almost entirely in verbal quibbles and contemporary allusions. Sometimes, for their blunders, they come in for a beating from their masters; and it is easy to understand how such scenes would make the pittites of Shakspeare's day roar with delight; but it is hard work, at this distance of time, to extract amusement from such horseplay. The Women's Women—that is to say, the handmaidens who attend on the heroines—resemble the men's men in the liberty they are allowed with their tongues; but in none of them, I suspect, is there any permanent vitality, except it be “the little villain” Maria, as she is called by Sir Toby Belch, in *Twelfth Night*, who presides over the orgies and practical jokes of that play with such inventive gaiety.

The men's men, as I have called them, are constantly falling into mistakes with their words—they will say “repose” instead of “compose”; “expectoration” instead of “expectation,” and the like—and Shakspeare extracts a great deal of wit of this kind out of his humbler characters. Indeed, the mark with him of the lower orders is that language baffles them. Thus Dogberry and Verges, who represent the police, go blundering over the Queen's English at every sentence. It may be remarked, in passing, how old is the practice of making the police the butt of popular

jokes ; and Shakspeare's charge against them is exactly the modern one, expressed in the music-hall line, that the bobby's duty is to walk the other way. Says Dogberry to the guard, "This is your charge—you shall comprehend all vagrom men ; you are to bid any man stand in the Prince's name". "But how," asks the Second Watch, "if a' will not stand?" "Why, then," replies Dogberry, "take no note of him, but let him go ; and presently call the rest of the watch together, and thank God you are rid of a knave."

There are other minor characters out of whose difficulties with the Queen's English mirth is extracted—such as the French Doctor practising in England. The Welshman comes in for very severe handling in this respect ; Shakspeare being almost as hard on him as Thackeray is on the Irishman. Sir Hugh Evans, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is the chief example ; and the last straw in poor Sir John Falstaff's burden of humiliation in that play is that he has lived to stand at the taunt of one who makes fritters of English and says "sheese" and "putter" instead of "cheese" and "butter".

On the other hand, there are characters whose amusing quality is their command of language. Shakspeare rather makes fun of the Schoolmaster, for example, because he thinks the sky is more to him than other men if he knows the Latin name for it. "Sir," says Sir Nathaniel, of one who knows no Latin,

“he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred of a book ; he hath not ate paper, as it were ; he hath not drunk ink ; his intellect is not replenished ; he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts :—

And such barren plants are set before us that we  
thankful should be  
Which we of taste and feeling are—for those parts  
which do fructify in us more than he.”

Observe the “taste and feeling” of the grammar and the versification of these lines !

Similar to the self-satisfied delight of the school-master in Latin is the use by certain characters of an inflated, theatrical mode of speaking. Such is the extraordinary dialect in which Pistol, one of Falstaff’s minions, always talks ; and there is even more swagger in the language of mine host of the Garter Inn in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He does not make use of language, but is carried away by it ; it flows from him like a torrent.

In this, Shakspeare was caricaturing the theatrical dialect of his day, which was artificial and inflated, full of sound and fury, blood and thunder. Indeed, one of the conspicuous sources of amusement in these Comedies is the ridicule cast on the manners and customs of the stage. Shakspeare frequently introduces a play within a play—that is to say, a portion of his

own play consists of the performance of another play, which is not supposed to be of his composition, but is written in the conventional stage-dialect of the day. Shakspeare was seeking to introduce nature and good sense ; and he takes this way of exposing the crudities of other dramatists.

Still more amusing is his exposure of the persons who at that time took upon themselves the art of acting. They were the most illiterate mechanics—the tailor, the weaver, the joiner, the bellows-mender—but such was their self-conceit that they were ready to perform anything on a moment's notice.

The prince of these stage-quacks is Bottom, the weaver, in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*: he is the very genius of stupidity, the very incarnation of self-conceit. The play which he and his fellow-mechanics propose to perform is *Pyramus and Thisbe* ; and he chooses for himself the leading rôle. "What is Pyramus?" he asks, "a lover, or a tyrant?" and, when he is told, "a lover," he exclaims, "That will ask some tears in the true performance of it: if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms." Yet he is not satisfied with this part; he wishes that Pyramus were not a lover, but a tyrant: "My chief humour is for a tyrant: I could play Eracles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.



The raging rocks  
And shivering shocks  
Shall break the locks  
Of prison-gates ;  
And Phibbus' car  
Shall shine from far  
And make and mar  
The foolish Fates.

This was lofty !—Now name the rest of the players.  
—This is Ercles' vein, a tyrant's vein ;—a lover is  
more condoling."

When the other players are named for their parts,  
he is not satisfied : he thinks he could do every part  
better himself. Thus he will do Thisbe as well as  
Pyramus :—

"An I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too ;  
I'll speak, in a monstrous little voice—  
'Thisne, Thisne'—Ah Pyramus, my lover dear,  
Thy Thisbe dear and lady dear."

Someone else is named for the Lion's part ; but  
Bottom cries : "Let me play the lion too. I will  
roar that it will do anyone's heart good to hear me".  
Someone objects that this might frighten the ladies ;  
whereupon he says : "I will roar you as gently as  
it were any sucking dove, I will roar you an'twere  
any nightingale".

Thus the first source of Shakspeare's comedy may be said to be Words—words used by those who can make them into playthings and words mastering others and making them ridiculous. For language is a strange thing: it is like a steed, which, when it has its master on its back, can be made to show the prettiest paces, but is able to unship the unskilful rider, who tries to mount, and send him sprawling in the mire. Language is the poet's own instrument: and Shakspeare knew all its possibilities.

Another source of his comedy—and a still more copious one—is Love. This, indeed, is the subject of which all these plays are full. It appears in an endless variety of forms; and over everyone of them there shimmers the iridescence of mirth.

Shakspeare's very first comedy—*Love's Labour's Lost*—has for its hero Ferdinand, King of Navarre, who, along with his three lords—Biron, Longaville and Dumain—has vowed to devote three years to books and study and never during this period to look upon a woman's face. All the arrangements are made, the precincts of the palace being strictly garrisoned against the access of the other sex, when it is remembered that the Princess of France is coming on business of state, which will brook no delay. A temporary suspension of the rules, therefore, becomes inevitable; and

the Princess, accompanied by her three attendants—Rosaline, Maria and Katharine—pitches her tent on a flowery meadow outside the gates. The sequel may be easily guessed. The four ascetic students fall desperately in love ; each of them tries to hide it from the rest ; but they all find each other out in the most amusing way ; and four marriages are imminent at the close ; though the ladies prescribe a year of delay, that their forsworn lovers may do penance for their broken vows.

This fable will strike some readers as familiar, even if they have not read *Love's Labour's Lost*. It was borrowed by Tennyson as the plot of *The Princess* ; and this circumstance will afford any young student who may wish to test his critical abilities the opportunity of comparing two great poets.

Shakspeare's treatment is full of spirit and "go" from beginning to end. It is especially remarkable for one very strong character—Biron, one of the King's companions. He is full of sardonic mirth, shrewd criticism of life, and self-mockery ; he reminds one not a little of one of Thackeray's finest characters—Pendennis's friend, George Warrington—and, indeed, one would surmise that in him we have a good deal of Shakspeare himself. He divines from the first the hollowness of the resolution of the Prince and his companions ; he is the first to confess to himself that he has been pierced by the shaft of love ; in fact, he

acts as the chorus of the play all through ; and at the close he sums up the truth of the whole :

Consider what you first did swear unto—  
To fast, to study, and to see no woman—  
Flat treason 'gainst the kingly state of youth.  
Say, can you fast? Your stomachs are too young,  
And abstinence engenders maladies.  
And, where that you have vowed to study, lords,  
Why, universal plodding prisons up  
The nimble spirits in the arteries.  
But love, first learned in a lady's eyes,  
Lives not alone immured in the brain  
But, with the motion of all elements,  
Courses as swift as thought in every power  
And gives to every power a double power,  
Above their functions and their offices.  
It adds a precious seeing to the eye—  
A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind ;  
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound  
When the suspicious head of theft is stopped ;  
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible  
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails ;  
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste ;  
For valour—is not love a Hercules,  
Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?  
Subtle as Sphinx ; as sweet and musical  
As bright Apollo's lute, strung with his hair.  
And, when love speaks, the voice of all the gods

Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.  
Never durst poet touch a pen to write  
Until his ink were tempered with love's sighs ;  
Oh then his lines would ravish savage ears  
And plant in tyrants mild humanity.  
From woman's eyes this doctrine I derive ;  
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire ;  
They are the books, the arts, the academes,  
That show, contain and nourish all the world,  
Else none at all in aught proves excellent.

This omnipotence of love, to conquer the most recalcitrant, is illustrated again in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Benedick, on the one hand, is as resolved to be a bachelor as Beatrice, on the other, is to die a maid ; yet Nature, assisted by a little pleasant deception on the part of their friends, easily forces them beneath the golden yoke.

Love is, indeed, a serious enough matter, and some may be indignant that it should form a theme for laughter. Yet it has its ludicrous aspects ; and at these there is no harm in laughing.

Its signs, or marks, for example. These are given in these comedies on many occasions. Thus, in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine asks his man Speed, "How know you that I am in love?" to which that worthy answers : "Marry, by these special marks : first, you have learned to wreath your arms like a

malcontent ; to relish a love-song like a robinred-breast ; to walk alone like one that had the pestilence ; to sigh like a schoolboy that had lost his A B C ; to weep like a young wench that had buried her grandam ; to fast like one that takes diet ; to watch like one that fears robbing ; to speak puling, like a beggar at Hallowmas. You were wont, when you laughed, to crow like a cock ; when you walked, to walk like one of the lions ; when you fasted, it was presently after dinner ; when you looked sadly, it was for want of money ; and now you are so metamorphosed with a mistress that, when I look upon you, I can scarcely think you my master." The witty Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, being asked what a lover should be like, replies : " A lean cheek ; an eye blue and sunken ; a beard neglected. Then your hose should be ungartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your shoe untied, and everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation."

Other observers, however, have noted marks exactly the opposite—the lover blossoms out into a dandy, in the hope of pleasing the eyes of his lady : " I have known when he would have walked ten miles afoot to see a good armour ; and now will he lie ten nights awake, carving the fashion of a new doublet".

Love is capable of a thousand extravagances ; and these Shakspeare loved to paint. Who but he can lend a voice to love's hyperbole of admiration ? In

the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine, who has been a despiser of love, meets with his fate; and he says:

Life is altered now;  
I have done penance for contemning love.  
O gentle Proteus, love's a mighty lord.  
Now can I break my fast, dine, sup and sleep,  
Upon the very naked name of love.

Proteus claims the right of preferring his own *fiancée*; to which Valentine replies:

And I will help thee to prefer her too.  
She shall be dignified with this high honour—  
To bear my lady's train, lest the base earth  
Should from her vesture chance to steal a kiss  
And, of so great a favour growing proud,  
Disdain to root the summer-swelling flower,  
And make rough winter everlastingly.

"Why, Valentine," replies Proteus, "what braggardism is this?" But Valentine replies:

Pardon me, Proteus; all I can is nothing  
To her, whose worth makes other worthies nothing.  
She is alone.

She is mine own.

And I as rich in having such a jewel  
As twenty seas, if all their sand were pearl,  
The water nectar, and the rocks pure gold.

In *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* there is a juice which the sportive Puck squeezes into sleeping eyes, with the result that, when they awake, they adore the first object upon which they chance to alight. Thus enchanted, even Titania, the dainty queen of the fairies, takes into her lap the ass-head of Bottom and thus apostrophizes that transformed weaver :

Come, sit thee down upon this flowery bed,  
While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,  
And stick muskroses in thy sleek, smooth head,  
And kiss thy large, fair ears, my gentle joy.

Is not the insinuation, that love is such a spell, able to transform the world and to make things appear to loving eyes very different from what they are?

It is worthy of note that the scenes of these gay comedies are nearly all laid in places remote—such as Venice, Padua, Illyria, the Forest of Arden, and the like. The truth thus shadowed forth is, that love creates a world of its own, very unlike the everyday world of reality. By love human beings are lifted above the common earth, receiving the password into a region of fantasy, illuminated by a light that never was on sea or land. In this fairyland we see the bright creatures of Shakspeare's fancy roaming—the faithful but too venturesome Julia; the wellnigh distraught Helena; the sprightly Rosalind, “a gallant curtle-axe upon her thigh, a boarspear in her hand”;



the brave Orlando; the melancholy Orsino; and all the rest. They are in search of one another in that land of mystery and glamour; for, as one of these Comedies says, "the course of true love never did run smooth". Too often they love the wrong people. Jack is sighing for Jill, but Jill is sighing not for him, but for James or Peter, who in his turn is sighing not for her, but for someone else. Hence the weary pursuit; hence a hundred disappointments. Yet everything comes right in the end, and true love has its reward.

Sometimes it is crabbed experience which, having outlived its own illusions, tries to keep youthful hearts apart; but these generally manage to elude the Argus-eyes and get their own way. A brilliant example is that of sweet Anne Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. When the night of her marriage arrived, her father intended her to marry the stupid and tongue-tied Slender, and her mother thought she was safe in the hands of the rich Dr. Caius; but she gave them all the slip and appeared as a married woman under the escort of the handsome Fenton.

The most astonishing wooer of all is Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The heroine Kate seems untameable as a wildcat; she bites her own sister and makes every man fly from her frowning looks and blistering tongue. But Petruchio, having taken her in hand, so completely eclipses the most extra-

vagant flights of her ill-temper by waywardness of his own that she follows him first in bewildered astonishment and ultimately in genuine submission. It is not a pleasing piece; and we are glad to learn that it was not of Shakspeare's invention—he merely worked over an old play—yet at the bottom of its extravagance there is a true idea—that temper and selfishness may be cured by seeing themselves in another. Kate was impenitent as long as she was shut up in herself; but, when she saw the visage of her own ill-humour in the mirror of her husband's madness, she learned how absurd had been her own conduct and became a reasonable member of society.

In married love the only thing that Shakspeare laughs at is jealousy. This he does in *The Comedy of Errors*, where, however, the satire directed against Adriana, the jealous wife, is lacking in lightness of touch. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the treatment is much more successful; and Ford, the jealous husband, is converted to the most unbounded confidence in his wife and to a much more healthy estimate of the world.

A few words may here be said of Shakspeare's treatment of illicit love. It is too well known how this subject has monopolized the stage. There have been periods when it has been almost the sole theme, the plot of every drama hovering round some indecent incident. Too often marriage was made a mock of;

the wronged husband was jeered at; and the bold seducer and the gay but unfaithful wife were the hero and heroine. In some quarters to this day these are the staple situations on the stage. Now, if anything of the kind were to be found in Shakspeare, it would be in his Gayer Comedies; but nothing of the sort exists there. In these plays there is a certain amount of coarseness. In the by-play of conversation the interlocutors take liberties which belong to a state of manners that has happily passed away; and the changes are rung with wearisome iteration on a few words and phrases of a dubious character. Even to the women, such as Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, there is attributed a licence which is anything but womanly, and is no doubt to be accounted for partly by the fact that in Shakspeare's time the female parts were played by men, women not being permitted to appear on the stage. But, in studying these Comedies closely, I have been impressed by the fact that indecency never enters into the substance of the plot: in some degree it may adhere to minor details, but it never is the pivot on which the action turns.

The only one of these ten dramas in which illicit love has a prominent place is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Sir John Falstaff assails the virtue of Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford; but the gay knight is represented as at that stage of his career when his fortunes are not only on the decline, but verging

towards desperation. Even his ancient hangers-on, Pistol, Nym and the rest, are quitting his service, as rats forsake a sinking ship. It is less under the impulse of passion that he goes a-wooing than under the constraint of impecuniosity: as he confesses himself, he makes love to Ford's wife, "because, the report goes, she hath all the rule of her husband's purse, and he hath a legion of angels"—an angel being a coin of the period. Mrs. Ford and her gossip, Mrs. Page, are merry wives, but as honest as they are merry. Falstaff has insulted them by sending to both an identical love-letter at the same time. But each, in her innocence, tells the other; and then they concoct together a scheme of revenge. Under pretence of encouraging him, they bring him to the house of Mrs. Ford, but only in time to be terrified by her husband, bursting-in to search for him with the town at his heels; so that Sir John, to save his skin, is glad to creep into a clothes-basket and be carried away out of the house as dirty linen. By which, says he, "I suffered the pangs of three several deaths: first, an intolerable fright, to be detected by the jealous husband; next to be compassed, like a good bilbo,<sup>1</sup> in the circumference of a peck, hilt to point, heel to head; and then, to be stopped in, like a strong distillation, with stinking clothes, that fretted in their own grease. Think of that—a man of my kidney—think of that—

<sup>1</sup> Spanish sword,

that am as subject to heat as butter—a man of continual dissolution and thaw—it was a miracle to escape suffocation. And in the height of this bath, when I was more than half stewed in grease, like a Dutch dish, to be thrown into the Thames, and cooled, glowing hot, in that surge, like a horse-shoe.” One lesson was not enough for the hoary sinner; but the merry wives gave him as many as he required, being assisted in the final stages by their husbands, to whom they had communicated their secret; till at last, the fat knight was so thoroughly punished and humiliated that, as he himself affirmed, “it was enough to be the decay of lust and late walking through the realm”.

Another source of comedy of a dubious nature is Drunkenness; and the bacchanalian poetry of such an author as Burns shows what rollicking fun can be made out of it. Of this there is not much in Shakespeare's Comedies, though there is a good deal in the comic scenes of the Historical Plays. *The Taming of the Shrew* opens with what is called an Induction, in which Christopher Sly, a tinker, is discovered dead-drunk on a bench in front of an alehouse, by a hunting lord, who chances to be passing that way. The lord is in a merry mood, and has him carried into the best room of the house, where he is surrounded with every luxury and, when he awakes, is greeted by a host of servants, as if he were a lord. They inform him that he has just recovered from an illness, in which he

laboured under the hallucination that he was a tinker; but, being now happily restored to his senses, they urge him to realise his true position. One of the entertainments they provide for him is to witness the performance of a play; which turns out to be *The Taming of the Shrew*. This Induction is capitally written, and the fun is well kept up. In *Twelfth Night* there are some very hilarious drinking scenes, the principal hero of which is Sir Toby Belch, who makes the hours spin-by with singing of songs and drinking of healths. His apology for his conduct is, that he is drinking the health of the lady his niece, under whose protection he lives; and, says he, "I'll drink to her as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria; he is a coward and a coistrel<sup>1</sup>, that will not drink to my niece till his brains turn o' the toe like a parish-top".

One more dubious subject of Comedy is Religion. Against it laughter may be directed; and it has not infrequently been. The temptation to do so was strong in Shakspeare's days, because Puritanism, which was coming into prominence, was not without certain peculiarities which invited ridicule. In *Twelfth Night* the house-steward Malvolio is called a Puritan; and he is unmercifully made a fool of by Sir Toby Belch and Maria, his sharp-witted coadjutrix. It is against him that Sir Toby's fam-

<sup>1</sup> Paltry fellow.

ous witticism is levelled: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" But Malvolio's Puritanism is only mentioned incidentally; the pomposity of his manner and the ambition of his desires, against which the ridicule is directed, have nothing religious about them; and there is in this play no sneering at the habits of a religious life or attempt to prove—as was so common among playwrights of a later date—that a profession of religion is identical with hypocrisy.

I have enumerated the principal subjects from which the mirth of these Gayer Comedies is evoked; but such an enumeration is far from suggesting all the variety of material, of situation and character embraced. While laughter is their primary object, much matter of a serious and even tragic character is introduced. Thus in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* we have a contest between the forces of friendship and those of love; in *As You Like It* a most suggestive account of the comparative virtues of town and country life; and it would scarcely be too much to characterize *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* as a great poetic discourse on the powers of the imagination. As the dramatist matures in the practice of his art, the development of character becomes more prominent and mere incident less conspicuous; thus the *Comedy of*

*Errors*, an early piece, is little better than a farce, while *As You Like It*, written eight years later, abounds with the subtlest analysis of character and at every step suggests meanings which do not lie upon the surface.

It would be easy, anywhere in these plays, to lift up handfuls of sayings wise, witty and perfectly expressed. Take a few collected almost at random :—

This on Book-learning—

Small have continual plodders ever won  
 Save base authority from others' books.  
 These earthly godfathers of heaven's lights  
 That give a name to every fixed star  
 Have no more profit of their shining nights  
 Than those that walk and wot not what  
 they are.

This on Word-mongers—

They have been at a great feast of languages  
 and stolen the scraps.

This on Old Fools—

The blood of youth burns not with such excess  
 As gravity's revolt to wantonness.

This on a Jest—

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear  
 Of him that hears it, never in the tongue  
 Of him that makes it.



This on a Bad Jest—

O jest unseen, inscrutable, invisible,  
As a nose on a man's face, or a weathercock  
on a steeple.

This on Sorrow—

Everyone can master a grief but he that has it.

This on the same—

For there was never yet philosopher  
That could endure the toothache patiently,  
However they have writ the style of gods.

This again on the same—

Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

This on Travel—

Home-keeping youths have ever homely wits.

This on Time—

Time is the nurse and breeder of all good.

This on Blarney—

That man that hath a tongue, I say, is no man  
If with his tongue he cannot win a woman.

This on Gossip—

What great ones do, the less will prattle of.

This on Mutability—

And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,  
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot.

Like all Shakspeare's plays, these Comedies contain passages, scattered not too sparsely here and there, in which the poet's genius rises to its full height, and the beholder is struck dumb with admiration of its gigantic proportions. Such is the well-known discourse on the Seven Ages in *As You Like It*, from the lips of the melancholy Jacques:—

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players :  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,  
In fair round belly, with good capon lined,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances ;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side ;  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank ; and his big manly voice  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange, eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

In strong contrast to this bright, realistic picture is the astonishing outburst on the power of imagination in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* :—

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold—  
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to  
    heaven,  
And, as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shaps, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

As has been already hinted, there is less of Shakspeare to be found in these Comedies than in the rest of his work. They display the toil of the playwright fully more than the inspiration of the poet. Some of them appear to have been written in haste, and the different parts do not hang well together. In the plots there is no great inventiveness; a few tricks of the playwright's art, such as mistaken identity and the assumption by women of male attire, are repeated to satiety; and some of the incidents, thus motived, are far from convincing. In one or two cases Shakspeare appears only to have touched up the work of older dramatists. Many pages of the dialogue in several of the plays are hopelessly obsolete, and the wit in them is as stale as exploded soap-bubbles. In the Comedies, in short, are to be found most of the withered leaves in the garland of Shakspeare's fame.

Yet there is at least one of these dramas which reaches a point of perfection attained by only three or four other plays in the poet's entire repertory. In *The Merchant of Venice* the execution is, as has been already hinted, as perfect as that of *Julius Cæsar* among the Historical Plays or *Macbeth* among the Tragedies.

This drama is founded, indeed, on several stories, which played their part in the literature of different countries before Shakspeare took possession of them ; but he has twisted the various strands into a single thread with initimable deftness, leaving no loose ends. It is as if the subject had found the genius of the author in its happiest mood and excited his powers to their fullest exercise ; accordingly, from beginning to end, everything moves with the lightness and grace of a bird on the wing ; and there is nothing out of date ; the colours are like those of the great Renaissance paintings—as fresh as if they had been laid on the canvas yesterday.

The theory has recently been started that the motive of this play was merely to fall in with the fury of the multitude against the Jewish race. A Jewish doctor, it seems, was executed in London for a plot against the life of the Queen shortly before its production ; and, in such circumstances, any picture exhibiting a Jew in a hateful or ludicrous light was certain of popularity. The gods in the gallery would simply howl with delight at Shylock rushing through the streets shrieking :

My daughter ! Oh my ducats ! O my daughter !  
Fled with a Christian ! Oh my Christian ducats !  
Justice ! the law ! my ducats and my daughter !  
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,

Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter !  
And jewels, two stones—two rich and precious  
stones !

Stolen by my daughter ! Justice ! Find the girl !  
She hath the stones upon her and the ducats !

There may be truth in this ; but, if so, it only shows how the genius of Shakspeare, when truly excited, carried him above the aims and passions of the hour. For even Shylock is much more than the monster of usury, the contemptible victim of the "hep, hep, hep" of the mob. The consciousness of a great people and the agony of a thousand years of persecution breathe in his words :—

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and, if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

In Shylock's defeat and humiliation Shakspeare appears to have no pity on him ; but that is a significant story which Heine, the German poet, himself a Jew, relates—that, when he saw the play acted in London, an English lady, sitting near him, burst into tears, at the end of the fourth act, and cried out, "The man is being wronged". At certain points so keen is the pain as almost to entitle the play to a place among the Tragedies.

*The Merchant of Venice* is, like the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a story of friendship—but friendship on a far higher level than in the earlier play. Antonio, the hero, is a Venetian merchant, of dignified and melancholy temperament, but full of genial humanity and

one in whom

The ancient Roman honour more appears  
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

He is extremely rich, his wealth being, however, afloat in vessels which are scattered over all the seas.

When his friend Bassanio asks him for a loan, in order that he may go to Belmont and prosecute his suit for the hand of the heiress Portia, he never thinks of refusing, though he has no ready money on hand, but applies to the leading Jew usurer on the Rialto for the sum required. This request gives Shylock his chance ; for he has against Antonio a deep and ancient grudge :—

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft,  
 In the Rialto, you have rated me  
 About my moneys and my usances.  
 Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,  
 For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.  
 You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
 And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
 And all for use of that which is mine own.  
 Well, then, it now appears you need my help.  
 Go to, then ; you come to me and you say,  
 " Shylock, we would have moneys "—you say so—  
 You that did void your rheum upon my beard,  
 And foot me, as you spurn a stranger cur  
 Over your threshold ; moneys is your suit.  
 What should I say to you ? Should I not say,  
 " Hath a dog money ? is it possible  
 A cur can lend three thousand ducats " ? Or  
 Shall I bend low and, in a bondman's key,  
 With bated breath and whispering humbleness,  
 Say this :—  
 " Fair Sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last ;  
 You spurned me such a day ; another time  
 You called me dog ; and for these courtesies  
 I'll lend you thus much moneys " !

He agrees, however, not only to lend the money,  
 but to do so without taking interest. Only he adds,  
 as if by way of pleasantry, that he will take a bond



from Antonio, binding him, in case the money be not repaid, in three months, to give the lender, in lieu of interest, a pound of flesh from his body. To this condition Antonio laughingly assents, knowing that, long before this date arrives, several of his ships will have come into port.

The best laid schemes of mice and men, however, "gang aft agley"; and at the expiry of the time Antonio has no money; for not one of his ships has come in, one after another of them having suffered misfortune. Shylock has been keeping his eye on the possible chance of the bond being forfeited; his temper has meantime been rendered savage by the elopement of his daughter with a Christian, a friend of Antonio's; and, as the time draws near and he hears of Antonio's losses, an inhuman fever begins to burn in his blood.

At length, the date having expired and the bond being forfeited, he has Antonio in court and is demanding the pound of flesh. In one hand he carries the scales, to weigh it, and in the other the knife, ready to cut it off. To all entreaties he is deaf, declaring that he will take nothing else than what is in the bond. By the law of the city, it seems, he cannot be denied; and the minds of those with whom the court is crowded are on the rack to witness the horrible denouement—when a new advocate appears upon the scene, to plead the cause of the accused.

This is Portia, the bride of Bassanio, for whose

necessities the borrowed money was procured. Bassanio's suit has prospered; he has successfully passed through the ordeal of choice appointed by Portia's dead father for the wooers of his daughter; and he has won not only her hand but her heart. In the very crisis of his happiness, however, he hears of the peril of his benefactor, and instantly hurries off, to see if he can succour him. Portia, left behind, is visited by a bright inspiration: she will be the advocate of Antonio, the friend of her husband, and deliver him from the grasp of Shylock. She hastily consults a friend, a renowned doctor of law, and, having received instructions from him, appears in the court in the nick of time, so well disguised in the gown and wig of an advocate that even Bassanio does not recognise her.

Portia is one of Shakspeare's most charming creations. Among his other women he has divided his gifts, but to her he has given them all. She is fresh, simple and gay, refined and sincere, and gifted with unmatched eloquence. Her appearance in court casts a spell over the audience; and slowly she proceeds to unfold her plea. She admits that the bond is forfeited, and that the law cannot refuse the pound of flesh. It looks as if she were giving the case away. Then she makes an overwhelming appeal to Shylock to have mercy; but he is as obdurate as the flinty rock. At last she discloses her line of argument: Shylock has been promised a pound of flesh; but in

the bond there is no mention of blood; and, if, in taking the flesh, he take one drop of that, the whole force of the law will be used against him. Thoroughly discomfited, Shylock asks to have his money and to be allowed to go off. But Portia arrests him as one who has conspired against the life of a Venetian citizen; and the lowest punishment for this is the forfeiture of all his wealth, one half of which shall go to Antonio and the other to the state.<sup>1</sup>

Portia retires from the court without being discovered and hurries home before the arrival of her husband, on whom, however, she has contrived, even after the solemn scene in court, to play off a merry prank, which shall afford food for laughter when they meet again. In the last act she re-enters, at midnight, the splendid home which is to be the scene of her wedded happiness, while the full-moon shines on the marble terraces, and gentle music floats over the banks of flowers; and, as we follow the youthful figure, radiant with the bliss of doing good, from the encompassing air above her the words seem to breathe which she uttered in the court-of-law and which contain Shakspeare's noblest definition of the essence of Christianity:—

<sup>1</sup>The fine due to the state is, however, ultimately remitted, and Antonio is to administer the other half for the benefit of the Jew's daughter and her husband. So, it may be argued, Shylock makes not so bad a bargain. Yet, I am certain, it is the design of the play not only to humiliate but punish the Jew.

The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed :  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest : it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown :  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings ;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway :  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings ;  
It is an attribute to God Himself ;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this—  
That, in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation ; we do pray for mercy ;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy.

THE GRAVER COMEDIES

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL  
MEASURE FOR MEASURE  
PERICLES  
CYMBELINE  
A WINTER'S TALE  
THE TEMPEST

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE GRAVER COMEDIES

ABOUT the year 1600, when Shakspeare was six-and thirty years of age and had still sixteen years of his earthly course to run, his genius underwent a natural modification. His comic vein, out of which the brilliant series of his Gayer Comedies had been produced, ceased to yield material of the same quality and quantity ; and his muse turned, by preference, to tragic themes. This was the period in which his great tragedies came into existence. Yet he still went on, at intervals, writing comedies, though without the same riotous abundance of inspiration. To this period belong six productions which we may designate his Graver Comedies ; their titles are printed on the opposite page.

Another name which has been proposed for these—or for some of them—is Romances. As a rule they have not the compactness of comedies, but rely for

<sup>1</sup> In the First Folio *Cymbeline* appears among the Tragedies ; while, by a lucky chance, *The Tempest* stands first among the Comedies—that is, first in the entire volume—where, by its perfection, it may have lured readers on who might have been dismayed by some of the earlier comedies. There seems to be no order in the arrangement of the Comedies or the Tragedies in the First Folio ; but the English Histories follow the chronological order of the reigns.

their interest more on the story they tell. *Pericles*, for example, in total defiance of the dramatic unities, moves from country to country and skips from year to year, telling a story on which, it would appear, the audience of Shakspeare's day hung with straining interest, although in our minds it rather awakens surprise that Shakspeare can have had any hand in putting together such an incoherent medley. *All's Well That Ends Well* is not unlike, in construction, to a modern novel. It is Shakspeare's version of the ever-fresh story of the Prodigal Son, who goes from home in search of adventure, but really in flight from his own happiness, and comes to himself after a bitter experience of the emptiness of the world. Several of the characters bear a striking resemblance to those of Thackeray's *Pendennis*—the heroine to Laura, the Countess to Pendennis' mother, Lafeu to Major Pendennis, and Parolles to Captain Costigan; although it must be confessed that, in such a comparison, the dramatist is a sufferer, his version of the sowing of a young man's wild oats and of his redemption through the love of woman being but a rude and slight sketch in comparison with the perfect picture painted by the hand of the great master of the modern novel.

The incidents on which these Graver Comedies chiefly turn are the reconciliation of husbands and wives, who have been separated by jealousy, the finding of children, who have been lost, the reunion of parted



friends and the forgiveness of injuries; and it is impossible not to wonder whether the preoccupation of the poet's mind with such themes had any connexion with his personal history. The year in which he returned to his native Stratford-on-Avon, where he spent his closing years, though still writing for the London theatres, and where, it is understood, he had left his wife and family during his residence in the metropolis, is not accurately known; but probably his visits to the place had become more frequent before he finally settled there, and his mind had been becoming more and more set on escaping from the excitement of the city and living permanently among the sights and sounds of the country.

There is in *Cymbeline* a fervid description of the enjoyments of the country, coupled with a severe criticism of the manners and customs of refined society, put into the mouth of Belisarius, who is a brother of the king but banished from the court. In this play, too, and in *A Winter's Tale*, there are charming descriptions of country sights, but especially of flowers. Perdita, in the latter play, says:

Here's flowers for you,  
Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram,  
The marigold that goes to bed with the sun  
And with him rises weeping;

and later she speaks of

daffodils,

That come before the swallow dares, and take  
 The winds of March with beauty ; violets dim  
 But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes  
 Or Cytherea's breath ; pale primroses,  
 That die unmarried, ere they can behold  
 Bright Phoebus in his strength—a malady  
 Most incident to maids—bold oxlips and  
 The crown-imperial ; lilies of all kinds,  
 The flower-de-luce being one.

And, in the same play, Autolycus sings :

When daffodils begin to peer—  
 With hey ! the doxy over the dale—  
 Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year,  
 For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.<sup>1</sup>

Of course Shakspeare might have written such praises of country-life at any period of his history, for he had the experiences of his youth, spent in the country, to draw upon ; but, occurring, as these do, in his later life,

<sup>1</sup> If the literary pilgrim happen to visit Stratford-on-Avon when the stream of visitors is not flowing, he may spend a delightful hour in the garden of the birth-house, where specimens are growing of the flowers, shrubs and trees mentioned in the plays. In one of those laborious books which only a German could have written I find it stated that there are a hundred-and-thirteen plants mentioned in Shakspeare's works ; and there they stand everyone with chapter and verse. According to the same authority the animals mentioned are a hundred-and-forty-four. KLOEPPER, *Shakspeare-Realien : Alt-Englands Kulturleben im Spiegel von Shakespeares Dichtungen*.

they may betoken either his yearning for the landscapes of Warwickshire or his enjoyment of them after his return.

The brightest element in these plays is the number of young people they contain, radiant with the bloom of youth and running over with animal spirits. These have been lost to their parents, and for a time their lot is obscured by misfortunes; but ultimately they are found and restored to their rightful condition. One would be glad to believe that these figures are a reflection of the poet's happiness in his own children, with whom he was reunited in the latter part of his life. Marina in *Pericles*, Miranda in *The Tempest*, with her lover Ferdinand, Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, with her lover Florizel, Diana in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and Guiderius and Arviragus, the two sons of the king in *Cymbeline*, belong to this attractive group.

The most charming of them all is Perdita. She is a king's daughter, but, having been lost in infancy, she is brought up in the house of a shepherd, who is supposed to be her father. In this lowly household she is engaged in the offices of a milkmaid; but she is, as someone calls her, "the queen of curds and cream" and, as another observer says, "the prettiest lowborn lass that ever ran on the greensward". Her beauty has attracted the attention of the son of the

king of the land of her exile, who, in defiance of the supposed discrepancy of their conditions and the wrath of his father, has avowed his love and resolved to wed her. His vows are warm enough :—

When you speak, sweet,  
 I'd have you do it ever ; when you sing,  
 I'd have you buy and sell so ; so give alms ;  
 Pray so ; and, for the ordering your affairs,  
 To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you  
 A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do  
 Nothing but that ; move still, still so  
 And own no other function ; each your doing,  
 So singular in each particular,  
 Crowns what you are doing in the present deeds  
 That all your acts are queens.

There is hardly a brighter page in Shakspeare's entire works than the festival of the sheep-shearing, when she presides over the scene, but so modestly that the old shepherd, her supposed father, has to rally her spirits by recalling the example of his own old wife :—

Fie, daughter, when my old wife lived, upon  
 This day she was both pantler, butler, cook,  
 Both dame and servant ; welcomed all, served all,  
 Would sing her song and dance her turn ; now here  
 At upper end o' the table, now i' the middle ;  
 On his shoulder, and his ; her face o' fire

With labour, and the thing she took to quench it,  
She would to each one sip. You are retired,  
As if you were a feasted one, and not  
The hostess of the meeting. Pray you, bid  
These unknown friends to 's welcome ; for it is  
A way to make us better friends, more known.  
Come, quench your blushes, and present yourself  
That which you are, mistress o' the feast ; come on,  
And bid us welcome to your sheep-shearing,  
As your good flock shall prosper.

Then ensue the revels of the country-festival, over which seems to blow the fresh air from the hills of everlasting youth, while the spirits of love, fun and melody attend the frolicsome rustics.

It seems to me, however, that another influence must have contributed to the creation of these bright figures in Shakspeare's imaginary world. It is on record that his fame as a dramatist secured for him the *entrée* to the higher ranks of society, and that he had several intimate friends among the nobility. In the existence of the wealthy and nobly-born there is no feature so prepossessing as the beauty and high-spirit of their children. Whatever may be the effect of wealth and long descent on morals, there can be no question that breeding, as it is called, exercises the happiest influence on the physical development, imparting especially to the young in this section of society an external charm which nothing can surpass.

The exclamation of Miranda, in *The Tempest*, at sight of the courtiers, is exactly such as might have escaped from the breast of a poet born in the bourgeois class at sight of a group of young people in some lordly house :—

Oh wonder !

How many goodly creatures are there here !

How beautous mankind is ! Oh brave new world,  
That has such people in't !

Shakspeare insists much, in these plays, on the effects of gentle blood. The lost children of queens and kings, though brought up as rustics, betray, by the refinement of their manners and by their soaring aspirations, that their origin has been regal. Thus, in *Cymbeline*, the lost sons of the King, though brought up by their banished uncle as huntsmen and unaware of their descent, are constantly revealing a spirit above their condition, so that their uncle exclaims :

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature !

These boys know little they are sons to the king,  
Nor Cymbeline dreams that they are alive.

They think they're mine ; and, though trained up  
thus meanly

I' the cave wherein they bow, their thoughts do hit  
The roofs of palaces ; and nature prompts them,  
In simple and low things, to prince it much beyond  
The trick of others ;

and again :

O thou goddess,  
Thou divine Nature, how thyself thou blazonest  
In these two princely boys    They are as gentle  
As zephyrs, blowing below the violet  
Not wagging his sweet head, and yet as rough,  
Their royal blood enchafed, as the rudest wind  
That by the top doth take the mountain-pine  
And make him stoop to the vale! 'Tis wonder  
That an invisible instinct should frame them  
To royalty unlearned, honour untaught,  
Civility not seen from other, valour  
That wildly grows in them, but yields a crop  
As if it had been sowed.

This is a different reading of human nature from that to which we are accustomed in this democratic age; but it agrees with the teachings of the modern theory of heredity and evolution. Shakspeare was no leveller: he believed that

Clay and clay differs in dignity  
Whose dust is both alike.

It is more than likely that the delightful figures of grown-up children with which these plays of his later life abound may have owed something to Shakspeare's own most intimate personal experiences; but it is a much more risky suggestion to hint that possibly

the figures of noble women, equally conspicuous in these plays, may have had something to do with his domestic relations. Every reader of Shakspeare has wondered, many a time, what manner of human being the woman was to whom was appointed the singular lot of being the wife of this greatest of all men of genius—who was six-and-twenty when he married her in his nineteenth year, whom he left in Stratford-on-Avon when he went forth to seek his fortune in the world and, as far as is known, never invited to join him in London, but whom he went back to live with in the closing years of his life. What sort of person did he, who had seen and experienced so much, find her to be after the comparative estrangement of these long years? was she, in any degree, fit to be the partner of the thoughts of that mighty mind? There is some evidence that his father's house was one in which earnest religion prevailed, and there is better evidence, also, that the same influence was conspicuous in his own family in the next generation. Religion, where it is experimental and scriptural, is able to deepen and refine natures which have had no advantages of education or society; and it has been conjectured that the wife of Shakspeare, in her loneliness, may have been thrown back on this resource. Did he, on his return, find her to be worthier than he had supposed and worthier, perhaps, than he deserved? His later Comedies, at any rate, abound with women who have



been separated from their husbands, who have been misunderstood and suspected, but who have ever been loyal and whose excellences have, in the long run, been discovered and acknowledged.

It is common to praise the women of Shakspeare's plays, in the bulk, as perfect and matchless expositions of female character, and especially as being in every instance true to nature. So accepted is this criticism that anyone dissenting from it lays himself open to the taunt that, by so doing, he betrays his own incompetence. Yet true criticism is best served by everyone, who has studied the subject with an open mind, saying what he feels ; and, I confess, I am not an unlimited admirer of Shakspeare's women. It has been already mentioned that in his day the female characters in the theatre were not played by women, but by boys dressed up as women ; and this circumstance could not but have a strong, if unconscious, influence on the mind of the playwriter. Some of Shakspeare's women seem to me exactly this—smart young men in women's clothing. Such is the awful heresy I hold ; and I am quite aware how dangerous it is to avow it. But now, let me add, how fervently I love and admire many of the women of Shakspeare. This, indeed, is a theme which has inspired more than one able pen. Mrs. Jameson and Lady Martin have written on it ; and the poet Heine has a book entitled " Shakspeare's Maidens and Women ". Among Shakspeare's natural and

successful pictures of women there are few that equal those of these Graver Comedies. What portrait of a woman could surpass Hermione, whose solidity of character and patience under injury have something of that monumental quality which seems to be indicated when she stands before her unjust but repentant husband as a statue, but ready to sink into his embrace? or than Imogen, who, when charged with unfaithfulness to her husband, asks with a pudency of virtue white as the innocence of infancy, "What is it to be false"? or than Isabella, whose glowing chastity cannot be moved even by the entreaties of a brother over whose head death is suspended, if she will not yield? These are not all the noble women of this group of plays, but I must not omit the very modern Paulina of *A Winter's Tale*, who has so tart a tongue for the self-importance and self-deception of men and is, at the same time, so tender and loyal a friend to the Queen she serves.

Side by side with these good women, we have in the Graver Comedies a group of nearly equally good men, mostly kings and princes, such as the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and the King of France in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Shakspeare was partial to the princely character, and he employs these royal figures as the mouthpiece for uttering his deepest thoughts on the course of the world and the management of man's life. For the same purpose he employs royal coun-

cillors, like Gonzalo in *The Tempest* and Lafeu in *All's Well That Ends Well*—men whose wits have been sharpened by intercourse with all sorts and conditions of men and whose criticism of life has more of salt in it than that of their royal masters. From the lips of such characters there fall moral maxims and eloquent outbursts of wisdom highly characteristic of the poet; indeed, this is the feature which chiefly marks out the Shakspearean drama and lifts even the least considerable of Shakspeare's plays up into a region which is all his own.

Let me cull, almost at random, a handful of such choice sayings:—

On the Seasonableness of Speech—

The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness  
And time to speak it in: you rub the sore  
When you should bring the plaster.

On Blessings in Disguise—

Some falls are means the happier to arise.

On Providence—

Fortune brings in some boats that are not  
steered.

On Self-help—

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie  
Which we ascribe to Heaven; the fated sky  
Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull  
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.

## On Obscure Virtue—

From lowest place when virtuous things proceed,  
The place is dignified by the doer's deed.

## On Laws not enforced—

We must not make a scarecrow of the law,  
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,  
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it  
Their perch and not their terror.

## On Gentleness—

Oh, it is excellent  
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous  
To use it like a giant.

On the principle, observed by St. Augustine, that  
past sins may be made the stepping-stones to virtue—

They say, best men are moulded out of faults  
And, for the most, become much more the better  
For being a little bad.

## On Responsibility for Talents—

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do—  
Not light them for themselves—for, if our virtues  
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike  
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely  
touched  
But to fine issues; nor Nature never lends  
The smallest scruple of her excellence,

But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines  
Herself the glory of a creditor,  
Both thanks and use.

On Little Things—

He that of greatest works is finisher  
Oft does them by the weakest minister.  
So Holy Writ in babes hath judgment shown,  
When judges have been babes.

On Popularity—

I love the people,  
But do not like to stage me to their eyes.  
Though it do well, I do not relish well  
Their loud applause and Aves vehement ;  
Nor do I think the man of safe discretion  
Who does affect it.

On Death, by one not prepared to die :—

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot ;  
This sensible, warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod ; and the delighted spirit  
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice ;  
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds  
And blown with restless violence round about  
The pendent world ; or to be worse than worst  
Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts

Imagine howling :—'tis too horrible !  
 The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature is a paradise  
 To what we fear of death.

As has been already hinted, the comic element is not very prominent in these Graver Comedies ; and, it must be added, what there is of it is not particularly successful. The author, indeed, strains after it ; but it is gone, like the buoyant step of youth. Besides, a good deal of what was amusing to the audiences for which Shakspeare wrote is now like salt which has lost its savour. Unfortunately, too, it must be confessed that in nearly all of these plays a considerable part of the action turns on incidents and ideas which are to our minds revolting and nauseous, though to the playgoing public of Shakspeare's age they appear to have been acceptable and entertaining.

Parolles, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, is a kind of reproduction of the character of Falstaff, but his heavy wit is stiff as a poker in comparison with the nimble genius of that prince of jesters. There is, however, played on him a practical joke, which is rather amusing. He is a braggart and a coward ; and his fellow-soldiers, to test his vaunted valour, propose to him an adventure, which he does not dare

to decline—namely, to recover a drum, left on the field of battle. He goes forth alone, shaking in his shoes, and, whilst he is discussing with himself the propriety of inflicting some wounds on his own person, to cause it to be believed that he has been fighting, he is surrounded by a band of his own comrades in disguise, who talk a jabber of nonsensical sounds, to make him think they are the enemy, and carry him off, blindfolded, to the general; by whom he is examined through an interpreter, to make him think he is in the enemy's head-quarters. In abject fear of death, he tells everything he knows about the numbers and the plans of his own side, slanders his officers and, in short, proves himself an irredeemable poltroon and liar; whereupon the bandage is removed from his eyes, and he sees himself surrounded by the jeering faces of his fellow-soldiers.

A situation not dissimilar to this appears in *Measure for Measure*, where Lucio, an inveterate gossip and scandalmonger, in conversing with the Duke, whom he does not recognise in the disguise of a friar, begins to throw out hints disparaging to the Duke's own character, and is drawn on from one pretended revelation to another, till he has thoroughly blackened his friend and benefactor, who thereupon throws off his disguise and confounds his accuser. The whole play of *Measure for Measure* is occupied with the unmasking of a hypocrite, and in this operation there

of course resides a grim irony; but it is too painful for mirth. Indeed, though *Measure for Measure* is counted, technically, among the Comedies, it is, in its total scope, one of the most solemn and tragic of all the poet's productions.

In the beginning of *The Tempest* there occurs a description of a shipwreck into which a good deal of amusement is infused. The King and his councillors, who are on board, come on deck; but the boatswain shouts to them: "Keep your cabins!" and, when one asks him if he knows to whom he is speaking, he replies, pointing to the angry billows, "What care these roarers for the name of king?" When another says, "Remember whom thou hast on board," he answers promptly, "None that I love more than myself. You are a councillor—if you can command these elements to silence and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more; use your authority: if you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap.—Cheerly, good hearts (to the sailors),—Out of our way, I say!" (to the King and councillors).

There is another scene of the same drift in *Pericles*; but the wit has a sharper point: "Master," says one sailor, "I marvel how the fishes live in the sea"; to which the answer is given: "Why, as men do a-land: the great ones eat up the little ones. I can compare



our rich misers to nothing so fitly as to a whale : a' plays and tumbles, driving the poor fry before him, and at last devours them all at a mouthful. Such whales have I heard on o' the land, who never leave gaping till they've swallowed the whole parish—church, steeple, bells and all." "But, master," rejoins the first speaker, "if I had been the sexton, I would have been that day in the belfry." "Why, man?" "Because he should have swallowed me too ; and, when I had been in his belly, I would have kept up such a jangling of the bells, that he should never have left till he cast bells, steeple, church and parish up again."

The cheeriest of all these Graver Comedies is *A Winter's Tale*, in which appears one of Shakspeare's most comic characters—Autolycus, of whom it may be said, as Falstaff said of himself, that he is not only witty himself, but the cause of wit in others, because he has been the prototype of not a few comic figures in later English literature, such as George Eliot's witty pedlar Bob Jakin, who is an undeniable imitation of Autolycus, and Dickens' travelling auctioneer, Doctor Marigold, whose flow of language is obviously imitated from the same source. Autolycus is a discharged serving-man, who, under stress of circumstances, has taken to the trade of thieving ; or, to use his own phrase, he is a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles". He first appears lying apparently wounded in the highway and crying out at the pitch of his voice for help, as a clown

passes, who runs to discharge the function of the Good Samaritan and, as he does so, is softly relieved of his purse. At the sheep-sheering festival Autolycus is the soul of the fun, astonishing the rustics with his torrent of words, singing ballads and selling them, commending the stock of his pack with a song :—

Lawn as white as driven snow,  
 Cypress black as e'er was crow,  
 Gloves as sweet as damask roses,  
 Masks for faces and for noses,  
 Bugle bracelet, necklace amber,  
 Perfume for a lady's chamber,  
 Golden quoifs and stomachers  
 For my lads to give their dears,  
 Pins and poking-sticks of steel,  
 What maids lack from head to heel,  
 Come buy of me, come, come buy, come buy,  
 Buy lads, or else your lasses cry  
 Come buy ;

and then, when his customers are fascinated with their purchases, plying his light fingers in the neighbourhood of their purses. Autolycus is a thief, but he pays for what he steals with his jokes and high spirits ; or, as Professor Dowden says, "he does not trample on the laws of morality, but dances or leaps over them with so nimble a foot that we forbear to stay him".

There is an abject way of reading Shakspeare, too prevalent at the present time, which worships everything written by him and bestows on one and all of his works the same unlimited admiration. This is objectionable for many reasons, but especially for this one, that, if our superlatives are thrown away in this prodigal fashion, we cannot get the use of them when they are really applicable. The fact is, Shakspeare is a very unequal writer; and among the Graver Comedies there are some so good as to excite wonder that the author who produced them should have fathered others so thin in substance and so disjointed in construction.

There is one of these plays especially that leaves the rest completely behind and takes rank with *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Cæsar*, *Henry the Fifth*, and the very choicest of the poet's productions. This is *The Tempest*, which is usually printed first in editions of the poet's works, a position to which it is well entitled, although it was in reality written last, or very nearly last, of all his dramas. Here there is no skipping from country to country and from year to year, as in some of the Romances: all is compact and coherent, and the action is comprehended within a few hours; every part of the action is in easy and graceful motion; every scene contributes to the effect of the whole, and nothing could be dispensed with; the language is sustained at a high level throughout;

and, every here and there, a passage occurs of matchless beauty or sublimity.

It is the story of Prospero, Duke of Milan, supplanted in the government of his dukedom by his scheming brother Antonio, who, with the assistance of the King of Naples, has driven him from his throne and country, committing him, along with the infant named Miranda, to a rotten and crazy vessel, in the expectation that they will never more be heard of. But, cast by destiny on a desert-island, Prospero has lived till his daughter has grown to ripe girlhood or the verge of womanhood, when, one day, his enemies—namely, his brother Antonio and the King of Naples, with Ferdinand, the son of the latter, and a number of courtiers—suffer shipwreck on the coast of this island and gather in various groups to the place where Prospero lives, who, having them completely in his power, recovers his dukedom, while his daughter becomes the wife of Ferdinand and, thus, the future Queen of Naples.

Prospero, while still at Milan, had been a great student. In fact, it was preoccupation with his studies which lost him his dukedom. When forced to quit his country, he was able to take his books with him, and, in the loneliness of the desert-island, he became a great magician. By his art he delivered the island from the witch Sycorax and compelled her misshapen offspring Caliban to become his servant.

This half-man, half-beast is one of the strangest products of Shakspeare's fancy. His name is said to be formed from the word "cannibal"; and the idea of so odd a creature is said to have been suggested by certain books of travel, published in Shakspeare's day, which contained accounts of savage men seen in remote corners of the globe. In Caliban, Shakspeare anticipates much which is occupying the attention of our age about the development of the man out of the brute. Apparently his opinion was, that the last thing to be developed would be the moral sentiment; for Caliban has brains and cunning; but he has learned language only to curse, he is haunted by perpetual terror, and his talent is employed in shirking work and plotting mischief. Shakspeare was no believer in "the noble savage".

Prospero has established close relations with the opposite section of the spirit-world; and the special instrument of his will is Ariel, whom he has delivered from the power of the witch Sycorax and thus bound to his service with the force of gratitude. This is one of Shakspeare's most delightful creations. He is not quite so light and airy as Puck in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, but he belongs to the same family. He has more intellect; and he flies like lightning hither and thither along the threads of the magician's webs of purpose, keeping every portion in order and making all work to one central point. It turns out

that it is Ariel who has raised the tempest which has flung the strangers on Prospero's island. It is he who guides the different groups to Prospero's cell—first, Ferdinand, the King's son, who, at sight of Miranda, plunges madly in love, while she, who has never seen any man before except her father and Caliban, is stupefied with amazement at his beauty and straightway loses her heart; then the King and the courtiers, but not before the King's brother has virtually become his murderer and the King himself has repented of what he did to Prospero—

Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;  
The winds did sing it to me; and the thunder,  
That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounced  
The name of Prospero—

then the drunken butler Stephano, with his bottle-holder Trinculo, with whom Caliban strikes up a friendship, proposing to them a design for the murder of Prospero, which is merrily foiled by Ariel; last of all the mariners, who come up in time to complete the picture. Ariel is here and there and everywhere: he flames like lightning on the sinking ship; he pours drowsiness, when necessary, upon waking eyes; he makes music in the air; he spreads a banquet before hungry guests and snatches it away again when they are on the point of eating; he prevents the King of Naples from being murdered; and he plunges Stephano

and Trinculo up to the ears in a vile-smelling bog. He is Prospero's faithful and indefatigable servant ; yet he is pining to be free ; and the reward of his great services at this crisis in Prospero's fortunes is that he is to be set at liberty.

Powers almost divine are ascribed to Prospero, such as the raising of the storm and the knowledge he possesses of the designs of his adversaries. He might almost be called an embodiment of Providence—that Providence which frustrates the plots of the wicked and makes all things work together for good to the righteous. But it probably comes nearer the author's thought to say, that he is an embodiment of Wisdom, and that Ariel is Science, working to the hand of wisdom and fulfilling its designs. The supreme effort of wisdom, however, is forgiveness : Prospero says of his enemies, when they are completely in his power :

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the  
quick,

Yet, with my nobler reason, 'gainst my fury

Do I take part ; the rarer action is

In virtue than in vengeance : they being penitent,

The sole drift of my purpose doth extend

Not a frown further.

It is difficult not to believe that, in some places at least, Prospero is Shakspeare himself. The island, about which it is suggestively stated,

The isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears ; and sometimes voices,  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again ; and then in dreaming  
The clouds, methought, would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me ; that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again—

this island must surely be the enchanted realm of poesy ; and Ariel is the spirit of poetry, able to raise and still the tempest, to curb sensuality, to terrify guilt, to bring lovers together and to reward honest labour. The different groups formed from the ship-wrecked crew are an epitome of the different sections of mankind or of the characters to be found in the poet's works, while the spirits with which the air is thronged are an intimation that in the poet's world, as in heaven and earth there are more things than are dreamed of in the ordinary man's philosophy. Ariel's passionate desire to be free, in spite of his attachment to his master, to whom he has rendered so long and splendid service, is a hint of the strain implied in poetic production and of the longing for release from the business of the theatre. It sounds like a plain intimation of the poet's resolution to retire from active life when Prospero says, towards the end of the play :



This rough magic  
I here abjure                   .                   .                   .  
                                    I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I'll drown my book.

And, when, still later, he intimates that he will retire to Milan, where every third thought will be his grave, the reference to the poet's own retiral can hardly be mistaken.

*The Tempest* is like a great piece of music, capable of expressing many meanings; and there is one thought still, behind, which is the profoundest of all. If this island, in the atmosphere of which musical sounds floated and magical forces worked, represented the realm of poetry, and especially represented the stage—that is, the little world on the surface of which the poet's genius displayed the passions and the principles which govern the great world—then the dropping of the curtain and the vanishing of the scene might easily suggest the final catastrophe of the world itself. This thought is not foreign to Shakespeare's other writings, but it is expressed in *The Tempest* in lines as grand as any he ever penned, occurring at the close of a tableau of classical divinities, presented as a play within the play:

These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air,  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped-towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant, faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on ; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

In this thought, that our so solid-seeming earth is only a transient phantasm, and that the hot and stormy ambitions of men are only the tossings of an uneasy dream, there is a solemnity almost biblical. In short this passage is the echo of a hundred texts of Holy Writ ; and, in order to make the truth complete, we have only to add, from the same source, the reflection, that behind these fleeting appearances there lies a reality which the mutations of time can never touch, because it is embodied in Him who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

## THE TRAGEDIES

ROMEO AND JULIET

HAMLET

OTHELLO

KING LEAR

MACBETH

## CHAPTER V.

### THE TRAGEDIES

IT is generally allowed that the crowning achievements of Shakspeare's genius are the four Tragedies which he penned in the first five or six years of the seventeenth century, when he had reached the maturity of his powers, being about forty years of age—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*—to which, however, must be added *Romeo and Juliet*, a splendid effort in the same species of drama written some years earlier. These five are not, indeed, his only tragedies; for several of his Histories would come under this designation; but they may conveniently be treated by themselves.

First, we have to ask what Tragedy is. If a comedy is a play written to move laughter, a tragedy is one written to draw tears. People like to laugh, but they also like to weep—not real tears, indeed, which are very different things—but tears that can be easily wiped away. It is one of the mysteries of our nature that, while real grief is so abhorrent, counterfeit grief should afford pleasure. But the fact is undeniable,

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Children like to hear a story that makes them cry ; the novel-reader considers no seal of the author's ability so certain as tears shed at the concluding chapter ; and it is a compliment even to a sermon that it has made the hearers wipe their eyes. The success of a tragedy lies in this delicious commotion of feeling which it excites in the last act, where the most prominent personages usually come to a violent end, the carnage being sometimes very extensive indeed.

"The tears of things" are the themes of tragedy. The hero is a person apparently destined by nature for happiness, but who somehow misses it and sinks under an accumulation of misfortunes, while others also are dragged down in his fall. The brighter his prospects have been and the more he has seemed to deserve a happy lot, the deeper is the pity stirred by his fate. What could exceed the pathos of the end of Othello? The hero is of a noble nature, as even his worst enemy confesses, and has served the state during a lifetime of danger and sacrifice, while Desdemona wins all hearts by her breeding, her frankness, her gaiety, her innocence, her wifely devotion ; yet the happiness they might have enjoyed together is turned into mortal horror. The tears caused by the drama must not be too bitter ; and so, while the fortunes of his heroes are sinking in the night of disaster and death, Shakspeare generally allows the faint dawn of a better day to become visible at the back of the clouds, to suggest

that good will yet come out of present evil. This is most manifestly the case in *Romeo and Juliet*, where, it is evident at the close, the death of the youthful lovers will lead to the reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets and the banishment of civil broils from the state.

But the most characteristic feature of the Shakspearean tragedy is that the catastrophe is always the outcome of some defect in the character of the hero. In *Macbeth*, which is in some respects the most tragic of all these productions, this is perfectly manifest ; for it is ambition that ruins the hero, who is, at the outset, a brave and honoured soldier of his king and country. In *Othello* jealousy is the passion which plays havoc with the character of the hero and the fortunes of those around him. King Lear's overfondness is at the root of all his misfortunes. It has been denied that in *Romeo and Juliet* Shakspeare at all disapproves of the conduct of the hero and the heroine ; but again and again, not only through the mouth of Friar Laurence but even through their own mouths, he indicates that their love has been too rash and precipitate to come to good. As Friar Laurence says, giving the moral of the whole,

violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die ; like fire and powder,  
Which, as they kiss, consume : the sweetest honey

Is loathsome in his own deliciousness  
 And in the taste confounds the appetite.  
 Therefore, love moderately ; long love doth so ;  
 Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.

Yet the catastrophe is not due solely to the defects of the hero : there is always a conspiring cause outside. For it is the nature of temptation that, when there is a defect within, it is made to quicken and grow by influences from without, and sin is always a birth from the union of inclination and opportunity. Evil is embodied not only in the individual heart, but in everyone's environment ; and external influences may bring guilt so near that it is almost inevitable—never, however, quite inevitable ; for it always requires the co-operation of our own evil will to bring the act to birth. The tempter may be a man or a woman. In *Macbeth* it is Lady Macbeth, in *Othello* it is Iago. Or temptation may arise from something more remote and general. Thus, in *Romeo and Juliet* the co-operating evil is found in the feuds of the rival houses and the feebleness of the sovereign power, which has allowed these to go on unchecked. Thus the Prince says, in the final scene :

Capulet, Montague,  
 See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
 That Heaven finds means to kill your joys with love ;  
 And I, for winking at your discords, too,  
 Have lost a brace of kinsmen. All are punished.



But there may be a cause of the catastrophe even more remote. This is made manifest especially in *Macbeth*, where, behind Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, there is the sinister influence of the Witches, who stir up the latent ambition in the hero's mind and suggest to him the crime which proves his ruin. These mysterious beings belong to a world of evil, lying outside the circle of humanity, in which, under one form or another, mankind has always believed; and there can be no doubt that such beliefs are due to a feeling that in misfortune there is an element not wholly accounted for either by the faults of the sufferers or by the wills of their human tempters. It is as if there were invisible wills, mixing unaccountable drops in the cup of man's destiny, as the Witches mingle the queer ingredients in their pot:

Fillet of a fenny snake  
In the caldron boil and bake,  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blindworm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing—  
For a charm of powerful trouble  
Let the hell-broth boil and bubble.

Here the Shakspearean drama approaches to that of the Greeks, in which the catastrophe is generally due not to the fault of the hero or even to temptation proceeding from those around him, but to fate, to the

envy of the gods at the excess of human happiness, or to the nemesis of some unexpiated crime, which has come down as an heirloom to the hero without his having participated in its commission or even perhaps being aware of its existence. The greater wholesome-ness of the moral taught by the modern poet is unquestionable, when he holds men and women to be responsible for their own misfortunes, because they bring them on themselves either through defects in their own character or by yielding to temptation. This is his usual procedure, though occasionally he plays with other influences to which human beings have ascribed their calamities, such as those of the heavenly bodies. In *King Lear* he makes one of his characters say: "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behaviour—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and traitors by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence, and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting-on".

The central interest of these Tragedies, then, is to show how the defect in a noble character, partly by the force of its own inherent tendency and partly by the force of circumstances, grows and grows, till it becomes predominant, placing the hero at variance with

the moral order of the world, which, however, cannot be turned aside but, sweeping on to its inevitable goal, crushes all who have attempted to impede its course. It has been pointed out that, in this series of dramas, Shakspeare has exhibited this course of events as taking place in different sections of human life: in *Romeo and Juliet* the happiness ruined is that of betrothed lovers, and the canker is precipitancy; in *Othello* the ruined happiness is that of a married couple, and it is destroyed by jealousy; in *King Lear* the relationship is that of father and children, and the canker at the root is overfondness; in *Macbeth* we enter the wider society of the state, which is overthrown by ambition; and in *Hamlet* the problem is the most complex of all, as the play deals with nearly all the social relationships.

As I have already hinted, *Macbeth* is the purest and most rapid of all these Tragedies, and in it, accordingly, we see the elements of tragedy in their simplest form.

At the outset, the hero is seen returning from successful war, which he has been waging in the service of King Duncan, who is well aware of his merits and forward to reward them. In the company of Banquo he is crossing an open heath, when they come upon the Witches, engaged in their incantations, who announce to Macbeth that he is to become Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor and King of Scots,

and to Banquo, that he is to be the ancestor of a line of kings. On Banquo this announcement makes no impression, as he "neither begs nor fears their favour nor their hate," but it takes instant effect on Macbeth, a clear sign that it has appealed to something in his breast, where the seed of treachery to his king must have been already sown. When, immediately afterwards, he finds himself actually created Thane of Cawdor and Thane of Glamis, he is worked up to the highest excitement by the certainty thus afforded that the rest of the prediction will likewise be fulfilled. In this mood he returns home; but meantime he has apprised Lady Macbeth by letter of the Witches' prophecy and its partial fulfilment; and she is far more completely carried away with the dream of ambition than he, and thus is prepared to screw his courage to the sticking place. For she is afraid that his ambition is not equal to the task of climbing the ladder of crime, which she sees to be the path to the throne. Thus she apostrophizes him in his absence:

Glamis thou art and Cawdor, and shalt be  
 What thou art promised; yet do I fear thy nature:  
 It is too full o' the milk of human kindness  
 To catch the nearest way. Thou would'st be great,  
 Art not without ambition; but without  
 The illness should attend it. What thou would'st  
     highly  
 That would'st thou holily;

and then she goes on, as conscious of a more resolute purpose in her own breast ;

Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal.

Thereupon a messenger announces to her the unexpected tidings that King Duncan is on his way to spend a night under her roof, when, in an instant, the crime to be perpetrated flashes on her, and she thus soliloquizes :

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, topfull  
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
 To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

Such is the temptress to whom Macbeth returns home; and in the awful crime of the ensuing night she is the moving spirit. He would have shrunk back, realising the horrible breach of hospitality and remembering the kindness he had received from King Duncan :—

We will proceed no further in this business ;  
 He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought  
 Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
 Which should be worn now in their newest gloss,  
 Not cast aside so soon ;

but she spurs on his laggard purpose, urging him to seize the opportunity placed by fortune in their way. She lays the dagger ready for doing the murderous deed, and says :

Had he not resembled  
 My father, as he slept, I had done it.

Her husband, after perpetrating the deed, forgets to leave matters in the chamber of horrors in such a posture as to incriminate the guards and is afraid to go back again ; but she cries, "Give me the daggers," and goes to lay them in the hands of the sleeping

sentinels, while she smears their faces with the murdered King's blood.

Thus have he and she seized the glittering fruit; but no sooner is it snatched than their pleasure turns to ashes in their mouths; for the conscience within them awakes in all its majesty; they eat their meals in fear, and night by night are shaken with terrible dreams. One of the most impressive scenes in the play is that in which Lady Macbeth appears walking in her sleep and repeating to herself the circumstances of the murder. She cannot get the blood washed off: "Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand".

Macbeth finds that one crime makes another necessary. What would be the profit of sitting on the throne, if the inheritance of it were to pass to another? And the Witches, who had promised him the crown, had promised to Banquo that his descendants should occupy the throne. Therefore Banquo must perish. But, though he added to his great crime this other deed of blood, he failed to secure the murder of Fleance, the son of Banquo, who escaped. In like manner the sons of King Duncan escaped to England, where they were joined by the best of the Scots nobles, and an army was collected to punish the guilty usurper, who meantime plunged deeper and deeper into crime, burning down the castle and massacring the family of Macduff, who had fled to the South.

The wretched man's mind is petrified with images of fear, presented to his eyes by a guilty conscience : he sees the dead Banquo, sitting in his place at the table, and hears a voice saying, "Sleep no more". Lady Macbeth's derangement ends in death ; and the lonely man is informed that the avenging army from the South has invaded the kingdom. He pulls himself together for a last effort, but it is with despair in his heart :—

I have lived long enough ; my way of life  
Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf ;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have, but, in their stead,  
Curses not loud but deep.

The Witches had promised that, till Birnam should come to Dunsinane, he should not suffer defeat ; but, when he saw the enemy advancing with branches plucked from this wood, like a moving forest, he realised how the powers of evil had paltered with him in a double sense, keeping the word of promise to the ear but breaking it to the hope ; and, though with reckless valour he plunged into the battle, his end was a foregone conclusion, and he fell by the hand of Macduff, the man whose wife and children he had cruelly murdered.



In *Othello*, the kindling of the passion of jealousy, till it becomes a devouring fire, consuming everything that comes in its way, is depicted with equal skill. But here what chiefly fascinates is the figure of the tempter behind the principal actor. Lady Macbeth, in spite of her unwomanly ferocity, yet, when the paroxysm of guilty passion is over and the deed done, becomes a woman again, suffering the tortures of remorse, and at last loses her reason and even her life in expiation of her guilt. But Iago is a villain who has no idea what remorse is. He acknowledges the nobleness of Othello's nature and is able to appreciate the sweetness of Desdemona, but, for a slight done him by the former and in order to mount a single step on the ladder of promotion, he is the cause of the death not only of them both, but also of others involved in their downfall. In one passage he attempts to justify his conduct and to argue that he is not a villain ; but it is only in fun : his selfishness is perfect ; nothing causes him a moment's compunction ; and he does not hesitate to adopt any means to attain his end. Outwardly he wears a mask of good humour so well that those nearest to him do not suspect his hypocrisy ; but his own wife exposes his treachery ; and, in spite of the many doublings of the fox, the teeth of the trap close upon him at last.

In Regan and Goneril, the undutiful daughters of King Lear, we have, if possible, still more revolting

examples of unredeemed wickedness. Their conduct is utterly abominable, and their figures are such as we should expect from the blood-and-thunder dramatists who preceded Shakspeare rather than from him, as, indeed, in the whole drama of *King Lear*, there is an unnatural exaggeration which, I confess, takes away, for me, very much of the pleasure which others seem to have derived from reading it. It is a defect that Shakspeare does not account for such utterly graceless figures as Iago, Regan and Goneril. Perhaps he holds that there are human beings who have derived from nature a double or treble dose of original sin and are irredeemably bad from the beginning—an opinion in which there are a good many who would agree with him and for which, I suspect, a great deal of proof could be easily accumulated.

The principal interest in the Tragedies of Shakspeare is the development in the leading characters of the passions which ultimately bring them to ruin, this involving the influence on them of the personages and events by which this development is stimulated, as well as the reaction in the body of surrounding circumstances, by which the wrong is ultimately crushed out of existence. The scene of the poet is a little image of the mighty world; and it terminates, as the great world will do, with a judgment-day, in which all are rewarded according to their deeds. Herein consists the majesty of the Shakspearean drama. It postulates

a moral order of the universe, which is inherent in the frame of things and slowly but inevitably overcomes and pulverises everything that erects itself in opposition to it. This divine element, ever at work in the constitution of nature, has its counterpart in conscience, which in the breast of a Macbeth sheds on crime so searching a light, while it produces in the minds of the spectators, witnessing the punishment of wrongdoing, a solemn sense of satisfaction and approval. The poet who can thus shape a world with righteousness at its core is a true creator, and the skill with which he disposes events in the fictitious world of his invention is an imitation of the Providence by which the real world is governed.

But, side by side with this predominant interest, there are minor sources of interest, which invest these productions with attraction and illustrate the genius of their author.

For instance, the scenery in which the drama is laid is generally most appropriate. This has been specially noted in *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and has been used to support the contention that Shakspeare must have travelled in Scotland and Italy. There is some slight evidence that the company of players to which he belonged travelled as far north as Aberdeen; and it would be pleasant to be able to believe that the

sense of the open air and of the windy expanses of heather in *Macbeth* is a reminiscence of personal observation in the land of the mountain and the flood. Does not the following description sound very like the recollected experience of a balmy day spent amidst the ruins of Tantallon or some similar bit of characteristically Scottish scenery?

This castle hath a pleasant seat ; the air  
 Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself  
 Unto our gentle senses. This guest of summer,  
 The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,  
 By his loved mansionry, that the heavens' breath  
 Smells wooingly here. No jutting, frieze,  
 Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird  
 Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle :  
 Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,  
 The air is delicate.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the atmosphere is as unmistakably Italian. Juliet is only fourteen—an age at which our girls are still playing with their dolls but, in the more forcing climate of the South, girls are already women. Under the potent influence of love she shoots up into the fulness of womanhood in a day, and is clear in vision, prompt in action, and unshaken in resolution and loyalty. Such protestations of affection as she and Romeo pour into each other's ears after the acquaintance of a few hours belong not

to the modesty of the cold North, but to a climate in which the sultriness of the nights harmonizes with the warmth of lovers' vows and where love is uttered to the accompaniment of the songs of nightingales.

Another feature of the art of these plays is the skilfulness of their commencements. In *Macbeth*, for example, the action opens with a momentary glimpse of the Witches on the barren heath ; and the sight of their weird figures and the sound of their incantations at once put attention on the strain, to learn what is to follow. In *King Lear*, with equal skill, the aged monarch is at once introduced partitioning his kingdom among his daughters, and curiosity is aroused to learn what will be the results of this strange procedure. In *Romeo and Juliet* the opening is more elaborate, but it gives an admirable idea of the lawless condition of the city of Verona and of the extremely strained relations between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Shakspeare is not so successful with his endings, either in these Tragedies or in his plays in general. The action often nearly comes to a dead halt at the very point where it ought to hasten to a close, and the dramatist has numbers of unexplained matters on hand, which he cannot get rid of satisfactorily in the space at his disposal ; so that he has to huddle things up at the close or to introduce a *deus ex machina* to solve the problem. Many a much inferior author is a

better story-teller: it is in reflections by the way and in the invention of memorable scenes that Shakspeare excels, rather than in the composition and symmetry of the whole.

A third and a very copious source of subordinate interest is in the minor characters. These sometimes illustrate the main theme of the drama in a kind of side-play. Thus, in *King Lear*, the subject is the parental and filial relation; but this is illustrated not only by Lear and his daughters, who occupy the foreground, but also by the Duke of Gloster and his two sons, Edgar and Edmund, who play their part in the background. In other cases the subordinate characters illustrate, by contrast, the qualities of the principal ones. Thus, in *Othello*, the pure and manly love of the hero is thrown into contrast by the dandy pursuit of Desdemona by Roderigo, and the deep and determined wickedness of Iago is thrown into darker shadow by the generous frankness and even by the failings of Cassio. It may be because he is a member of my own profession that I have a special partiality for Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*. He is the spiritual brother of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who not only wears the disguise but has the heart of a clergyman. Shakspeare, unlike Thackeray, was indulgent in his judgment of the clerical profession, making its members the mouthpiece of wisdom and charity. Friar Laurence sympathizes with the star-

crossed lovers and assists their schemes, though he chastises their impetuosity with the rebukes of experience. His speeches accompany the whole course of the action as a chorus of mild and placid wisdom ; yet he is not incapable of kindling into fiery indignation ; for, when Romeo threatens to commit suicide in his cell, because he is to be banished for a time from the society of Juliet, he exclaims :

Hold thy desperate hand.  
Art thou a man? Thy form cries out, thou art.  
Thy tears are womanish ; thy wild acts denote  
The unreasonable fury of a beast.  
Thou hast amazed me. By my holy order  
I thought thy disposition better tempered.  
What, rouse thee, man ! Thy Juliet is alive,  
For whose dear sake thou wast but lately dead—  
There thou art happy. Tybalt would kill thee,  
But thou slewest Tybalt—there art thou happy too.  
The law, that threatened death, becomes thy friend  
And turns it to exile—there art thou happy.  
A pack of blessings lights upon thy back ;  
Happiness courts thee in her best array ;  
But, like a misbehaved and sullen wench,  
Thou pout'st upon thy fortune and thy love.  
Take heed, take heed, for such die miserable.

Even in the Tragedies Shakspeare occasionally avails himself of the popularity of comic incidents and

characters. For this he has been censured on account of the incongruity of making people laugh when they have come to weep. But he can be defended on the ground that all events have two faces—one to turn to the weeping and another to the laughing philosopher—and because where there is shadow there must also be sunshine. If the drama is an image and picture of life, it must exhibit laughing figures as well as weeping ones, for every street in the world contains both.

In *King Lear* the depth of gloom is oppressive, and it is no doubt in order to relieve this a little that a comic figure is kept moving in and out from the beginning to the end of the action. This is the King's Fool, who, taking advantage of the licence of his office, keeps up a running comment of irony on the progress of events. He strongly disapproves of his master's conduct in giving away his kingdom in his own lifetime; for he says to Lear:

"Give me an egg, nuncle, and I will give thee two crowns."

*Lear.* "What two crowns shall they be?"

"Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' the middle and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou had'st little wit in thy bald



crown, when thou gavest thy golden one away."

And again :—

"Canst thou tell how an oyster makes his shell?"

*Lear.* "No."

"Nor I neither; but I can tell why a snail has a house."

*Lear.* "Why?"

"Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case."

Yet, in spite of his shrewd perception of his master's folly, he sticks to him through all his misfortunes with the most touching loyalty, and he is, in short, the most pathetic and lovable of all fools.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, also, the comic element receives pretty free play. Mercutio, the friend of Romeo, has a merry tongue, to which, indeed, he gives only too unhindered course, allowing it to dally sometimes with those things of which it is a shame even to speak. From him we get the famous description of Queen Mab, one of the figures of that fairy world which Shakspeare delighted so much in delineating :—

She is the fairies' midwife ; and she comes  
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone  
On the forefinger of an alderman,  
Drawn with a team of little atomies  
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep ;  
Her waggonspokes made of longspinners' legs,  
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,  
Her traces of the smallest spiders' web,  
Her collars of the moonshine's watery beams,  
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film ;  
Her waggoner a small greycoated gnat,  
Not half so big as a round little worm  
Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid ;  
Her chariot is an empty hazelnut,  
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,  
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.  
And in this state she gallops night by night  
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love ;  
O'er courtiers knees, that dream on court'sies straight ;  
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees ;  
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream.  
Sometimes she gallops o'er a courtier's nose,  
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit ;  
And sometimes comes she with a tithe-pig's tail,  
Tickling a parson's nose as a' lies asleep,  
Then dreams he of another benefice ;  
Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,  
And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,

Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,  
Of healths five-fathom deep ; and then anon  
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,  
And, being thus frightened, swears a prayer or two  
And sleeps again.

To a hot-tempered soldier Mercutio says : “ Thou ! why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes. Thou hast quarrelled with a man for coughing in the street, because he hath wakened thy dog lying asleep in the sun. Didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter, and with another for tying his new shoes with old riband ? And yet thou wilt tutor me from quarrelling.” So incorrigible a humourist is he that he jokes even in the article of death. When he is fatally stabbed by Tybalt, his friend Romeo, under whose arm the sword has passed, says, “ Courage, man ; the hurt cannot be much ” ; and his answer is all the sadder because of its air of merriment : “ No, it is not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door. But 'tis enough, it will serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you will find me a grave man.”

Of all the Tragedies of Shakspeare the favourite

is *Hamlet*. Indeed, this is universally acknowledged to be the supreme product of dramatic genius in modern times, the only possible rival to it being the *Faust* of Goethe.

Yet it cannot be contended that *Hamlet* is, from every point of view, the best of our author's works. It has not the movement and the pace of *Macbeth*; it is not, like *Julius Cæsar* or *The Tempest*, a work without a flaw, without a word too much or a word too little—"one entire and perfect chrysolite"—it lacks the delicate and haunting charm of *The Merchant of Venice*. The play within the play, performed before the King and Queen, at Hamlet's instigation, in order to probe the conscience of these evildoers, is on a theme which no company of actors would have dared to represent before the court in the circumstances, and is, therefore, altogether unnatural and out of place. There are other improbabilities and incongruities, which mar the artistic effect; and the interest falls off towards the end, the last two acts being nothing like so fine as the first three.

Still, in spite of these defects, this drama holds the foremost place. If it does not do so by its perfection as a whole, it effects it by the vast numbers of good things it contains. It has nearly all the minor sources of interest already noted in the other tragedies. For instance, it begins well, the apparition of the ghost of the murdered king putting curiosity and attention

on the stretch. The minor characters are decidedly interesting. There is Horatio, the friend of Hamlet, who draws forth from the hero this matchless description of friendship:—

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice  
And could of men distinguish, her election  
Hath sealed thee for herself; for thou hast been  
As one in suffering all that suffers nothing;  
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blessed are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,  
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee.

There is Ophelia, whose treatment at the hands of the hero is one of the puzzles of this play on which the commentators have expended a world of speculation without doing much to clear up the mystery, but who, in her fondness, her sufferings and her fate, is one of the most unique and pathetic of Shakspeare's female characters. And there is her father Polonius, perhaps the most effectively painted of all the minor figures in Shakspeare's vast gallery of portraits—the type of the courtier and councillor, with unbounded confidence in the virtue of his own advice, with maxims

and proverbs ready for every occasion, and with a formality and tediousness sufficient to drive any poor child of nature mad that comes within range of his longwinded eloquence. There is a strong dash of comedy in the portraiture of this worthy ; and the comic element is supplied in this play in considerable quantity. It is, however, of grim and sardonic quality, the principal scene of this kind being in the churchyard, when the gravediggers, engaged in making the last resting place for Ophelia, exchange grim pleasantries, as they perform their ghastly function.

But in *Hamlet*, more than in any of the other Tragedies, the interest is concentrated on the hero—on his character, his relations with the other figures of the play, and the catastrophe in which he is ultimately involved. His speeches, of which he is very liberal, are the finest things of the kind in existence ; and the opportunities of declamation which they afford to actors doubtless account, to some extent, for the popularity of this play. His advice to the players, for example, seems expressly written for the purpose of giving an elocutionist a chance ; but, as Shakspeare's own calling was that of an actor, it has also an unrivalled autobiographical interest :—" Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But, if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the towncrier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand

thus, but use all gently ; for, in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. Oh it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters—to very rags—to split the ears of the groundlings . . . I would have such a fellow whipped. . . . Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you overstep not the modesty of nature. Oh, there be players that I have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably."

Hamlet is a young prince, with all the advantages the world can offer—

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The observed of all observers—

yet he is completely out of temper with the world.  
And this is always a popular figure ; for, as we like

to weep artistic tears, however much we may deprecate real ones, so the most fashionable and conventional people enjoy hearing conventionality belaboured, as Hamlet attacks it :—

O God, O God,  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world.

“I have of late lost all my mirth ; and it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory ; this most excellent canopy, the air—this brave o’erhanging firmament—this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. . . . Man delights not me ; no, nor woman neither.” So far gone is he in this world-weariness that he has had thoughts of getting rid of the burden of life by his own act, and some of his most eloquent speeches are on the subject of suicide ; as, for example, the one, too well known to be quoted, beginning, “To be, or not to be, that is the question”. Such thoughts, too, are always popular, as was proved by the sensation produced throughout Europe by *The Sorrows of Werther*. Even those who have not the slightest desire really to get quit of life like to trifle with the edge of the razor, and they feel a kind of tragic exaltation in so doing.



But, passing from these causes of the popularity of this play, which lie on the surface, what do we find to be the central quality of Hamlet's character? what is the passion which sweeps him from the path leading to happiness and, at the close, involves him and others in ruin? It is not any passion, but rather the absence of passion. This is the peculiarity of Hamlet, that the catastrophe is due not to what is done but to what is not done.<sup>1</sup>

Through the apparition of his father, the late King of Denmark, Hamlet learns that his mother and the husband she has married with unseemly haste after the death of the late king are murderers, and he is summoned to avenge the crime by which he has lost a father and perchance a throne. He appears to dedicate himself without hesitation and reserve to the dreadful task; for he says to the ghostly visitant:

Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

<sup>1</sup>“‘The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right.’

In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakspeare meant, in the present case, to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. In this view the whole piece seems to me to be composed. There is an oak tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.” GOETHE: *Wilhelm Meister* (Carlyle's Translation), I. 200.

Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there ;  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter.    Yes, by Heaven !

But, when he turns from the resolution to the execution, he finds the deed abhorrent to both the habits of his past and the temper of his mind, which have been those of the scholar and the philosopher. He, therefore, hesitates and waits for a convenient season ; and, as he waits, his resolution cools. He argues that he requires better proof of the guilt of the man he has to slay than the word of an apparition—a very good argument, but one which, it is evident, he uses only as an excuse ; for, after he has received proof positive by means of the play performed before the King and Queen, he hesitates still. Once he gets an excellent opportunity, as he comes upon the King at prayer ; but he invents the excuse that, if the guilty man were slain at his prayers, his soul might go to heaven.

With manufactured reasons like these he defers the disagreeable duty ; although he scourges himself with terms of contempt for putting it off. When he sees the actors weeping in the performance of their parts, he cries :

Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I !  
Is it not monstrous, that this player here  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That, from her working, all his visage wanned,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in 's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!  
For Hecuba !

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba ?  
Yet I, a dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
And can say nothing. . . . Am I a coward ?

So, when the soldiers of Fortinbras march past, he reflects that they are risking their lives for nothing, while the strongest and most sacred reasons fail to move him to strike the necessary blow.

At last he does strike, but it is rather by chance than of set purpose ; and he loses his own life in the same hour ; for his culpable delay has set in motion the forces of retribution, from which there is no escape.

It is a remarkable circumstance that, in our author's greatest tragedy, the catastrophe is brought about not by something done, but by something left undone. It recalls many a warning word of the Gospel ; for the Great Teacher spoke of the final verdict of condemnation as being due to the neglect rather than to the misuse of talents. More perhaps fail through

missing the opportunities provided by Providence than through yielding to the propensities of passion. When the voice of duty is clearly heard, the answer to the call cannot be too prompt, too much consideration only abating the glow of resolution and robbing action of its force. A great poet of our own day has crushed into a stanza the moral of Hamlet :—

We cannot kindle when we will  
The fire which in the heart resides ;  
The spirit bloweth and is still,  
In mystery our soul abides.  
But tasks in hours of insight willed  
Can be through hours of gloom fulfilled.

THE MINOR POEMS  
AND THE LIFE OF SHAKSPEARE

VENUS AND ADONIS  
THE RAPE OF LUCRECE  
THE SONNETS  
A LOVER'S COMPLAINT  
THE PHCENIX AND TURTLE  
THRENOS  
THE PASSIONATE PILGRIM

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE MINOR POEMS AND THE LIFE OF SHAKSPEARE

THERE are many places which attract the tourist through association with the names of famous people but disappoint expectation, because the relics of the past have almost entirely disappeared. This is not the case with Stratford-on-Avon, the birthplace of Shakspeare. As it is approached from Leamington, the station next to it, Wilmcote by name, suggests to the memory Mary Arden, his mother, who was born there. Then, when the visitor descends from the train at Stratford-on-Avon itself, a few minutes take him to the house of the poet's birth; and about the identity there seems to be no doubt.<sup>1</sup> A few minutes more will take him to the school in which the boy Shakspeare was educated and which still serves the same purpose for the children of the town. Between these lies the property which he purchased in his manhood, in order to spend in it the evening of life; and, although the building has disappeared, the garden still remains, having been enlarged so as

<sup>1</sup> Some think the adjoining house was the birthplace.

to form a public pleasure-ground. At the eastern end of the town, by the bank of the Avon and in the midst of noble trees, stands Trinity Church, in which he lies buried. About a mile from the town is the hamlet of Shottery, in which is preserved the cottage—one of three connected houses running upwards from the road—in which he courted his bride; and not more than three miles away, in another direction, stands the handsome mansion of Charlecote, surrounded by a noble park, associated with an escapade of his youth.

The Stratford-on-Avonians are well aware how valuable an asset is the memory of their fellow-townsmen, and they have converted the whole town into a kind of monument to his honour, crowding every place in any way belonging to him with relics and furnishing these with intelligent ciceroni, to explain everything to the curious visitor. The stream of pilgrims flows at the rate of about a hundred a day on an average, although of course it swells in the holiday-months and ebbs in the winter-season. For a parallel to such popularity we must go to the birthplace of Robert Burns at Ayr, to which there flows annually a still larger stream of visitors, or to the scene of Martin Luther's imprisonment at Eisenach, which Carlyle declared to be the most sacred spot he had ever visited on earth, or to the shrine of Saint Francis at Assisi. In Mediæval England the cor-



responding spot was Canterbury, to which pilgrims flocked to visit the tomb of Thomas Becket; but Shakspeare is the saint of Modern England, or rather the saints have been displaced by a poet.

It is appropriate that Stratford should be the shrine of Shakspeare, because he was a true Stratford-on-Avonian, the place of his birth exercising a strong spell over his heart. Though his fame now fills the world, there was a time when to himself it was of immeasurable consequence to be well spoken-of by the gossips in the streets of Stratford, and, in spite of the flight of his fancy, embracing the entire realm of nature, he had in unusual degree the desire, by which ordinary men are haunted, when they have gone forth into the world in search of fortune, to be an owner of property in the place of his birth, as well as to return thither for repose, after the battle of life had been successfully fought out. An additional appropriateness may perhaps be discerned in the relation of the place to the rest of England. On the outer wall of the pump-room at Leamington there is a large map of the surrounding neighbourhood, on which a spot is marked as being the centre of England, and this is only a few miles from Stratford-on-Avon; so that he who was destined to voice most successfully the sentiments of Englishmen was born at the very heart of their country.

At Stratford-on-Avon, then, William Shakspeare was

born in the month of April, 1564. The precise day is not known; only the date of his baptism, 26 April, being preserved in the church-register. The twenty-third is usually assumed to have been the day of birth, perhaps to correspond with the day of his death, which was 23 April, 1616. He was the third of the seven children of John Shakspeare, glover, corn-merchant or butcher—he may have been all three—and there is an old tradition that William, in early youth, assisted his father in his trade, though, according to other traditions, he is said to have been in his youth a schoolmaster or a lawyer's clerk. The father was a man of repute in the little community, advancing so far as to be a councillor and even treasurer and chief magistrate of the town; but, in the midtime of life, his private fortunes declined, until they were restored through the prosperity of his famous son.<sup>1</sup> Of the

<sup>1</sup>In *Shakespeare Puritan and Recusant* the Rev. T. Carter has endeavoured to prove that the poverty into which John Shakspeare sank was due to the fines imposed upon him as a Puritan, especially for non-attendance at the meetings of the Corporation, from which he absented himself when the business to be done—that of persecuting his co-religionists—was contrary to his convictions. He is of opinion, besides, that it was partly feigned, the persecuted man transferring his property nominally to relatives, in order to escape the demands of the law; and there is certainly a discrepancy, difficult to explain, between the notices of his poverty and the property he is known to have held at the same time. Mr. Carter appears to me to have proved that the father of the poet did not adhere to the old religion, as has been frequently assumed; he has made out a plausible case also for his Puritan-

mother we would gladly know more than we do, genius being so often inherited from that side of the stock. It is probable that she was of somewhat better social condition than her husband, as she brought him a property situated in the neighbouring hamlet whence she came, which, however, slipped from his grasp in the decline of his affairs.

Ben Jonson's well-known remark has been already quoted that Shakspeare had little Latin and less Greek; but it was of immense consequence for his subsequent career that he had a little of both. This he obtained at the Free Grammar School, which existed before his time on an ancient foundation; and the position of the father was such as to assure to his son the best education obtainable there. French and Italian would have been useful to him in subsequent life, in the collection of such materials as are required by a dramatist for the purposes of his profession; and it is probable that he may have been sufficiently acquainted with either or both of these languages to

ism; but, when he goes on to conjecture that the son's adventure among Sir Thomas Lucy's deer may have been an act of revenge for the persecution inflicted on his father by a bench on which this Justice sat, he seems to have nothing solid to go upon. Mr. Carter's book, however, sheds a flood of light on the religious history of Warwickshire at that time; and, when one sees how much can be learned, through the diligent investigation of local records, about a man so obscure as Shakspeare's father, one ceases to be surprised at the completeness with which the biography of the son has been pieced together.

be able to dig out the information they concealed. As, however, his was an age when, in the flush of the Renaissance, not only the literatures of the ancient world but the literary masterpieces of Italy and France were being zealously translated into English, it is seldom certain whether Shakspeare went to the originals or contented himself with translations. His references to schoolmasters are not over-respectful ; but from this it would not be safe to underestimate the debt he owed to them. Though he missed the advantages of a university education, he enjoyed as good opportunities, short of these, as the times afforded.

It is useless to indulge in conjectures as to the kind of scholar he must have been, though one may wonder what was thought of him by the schoolmasters whose names local antiquarians are still able to supply. His precocity manifested itself in a different way when, at the age of eighteen, he married a woman several years older than himself. This was Anne Hathaway, who resided, as has been already remarked, in the neighbouring hamlet of Shottery ; and her social position appears to have differed little, if anything, from his own. Very soon there was born to them a daughter, and a son and another daughter followed.

What means Shakspeare had at this time for supporting a wife and family we do not know ; but the next incident in his life is one which betokens either extreme necessity or a recklessness ill-befitting the

condition of the head of a family. He was caught deer-stealing on the estate of Charlecote—the local chauffeur will undertake to point out to the visitor the very spot where this took place—and was brought as a culprit before Sir Thomas Lucy, the owner of the property, who, though satirised, as Justice Shallow, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, would appear to have been a gentleman of credit and cultivation. The estate is still in the family, and in the parks round the mansion-house are to this day to be seen numbers of deer, the successors of those on which the larceny of the youthful Shakspeare was practised.

The consequence of this escapade was that Shakspeare fled the country, not taking his family with him; and he turned up in London in a penniless condition. His first occupation there, tradition alleges, was to hold the horses of the gentry visiting the theatre. Soon, however, he found his way inside, becoming a player of minor parts; and from these he advanced by degrees to be a regular member of the theatrical company, though he never specially shone as an actor, being excelled by others, especially by Richard Burbage, the most renowned actor of the day. With him and others he at length became a joint-proprietor<sup>1</sup>; and in 1599 they opened a new theatre, the Globe, on the south side of the Thames, where their business flour-

<sup>1</sup> Or at least joint-participant in the receipts.

ished to such a degree that his share in it grew to be a valuable property. The company made annual tours in the provinces, and thus Shakspeare may have been brought into occasional contact with his family in Warwickshire.

For us, however, the most interesting portion of his activity in London has still to be mentioned. Plays, in those days, were, as has been mentioned on an earlier page, the property of the theatres in which they were represented, being kept in manuscript under lock and key ; and the management were entitled to adapt them to any occasion, adding or subtracting as the taste or temper of the audience might require. It is easy to understand how any actor who could be depended upon to perform such work when it was required would hold a secure position in the company, and at such tasks Shakspeare proved a skilful hand. There were plays by other dramatists in possession of the company, when he joined it, and these he renovated and improved. He displayed facility in collaborating ; and, as Raphael, the greatest of painters, exhibited wonderful skill in borrowing hints of all kinds from other artists, so this greatest and most original of all literary artists was always ready to borrow either materials or modes of treatment from his contemporaries. From tinkering the productions of others he advanced to the composition of dramas of his own ; and these he poured forth at an average rate of about

a couple in the year, till he had acquired perfect mastery, and none could match him.

In the birth-house at Stratford there hangs an engraving of London as it was when Shakspeare arrived in it, which enables the onlooker to realise how inconsiderable at that time was the city which has now swollen to such unholy dimensions. The real city then lay between the Tower and St. Paul's, with something beyond at either end. Where Hampstead now stands may be seen, on this map, only a lonely mill among the fields. There was but a thin line of habitations on the south side of the river. Yet it is a tribute to the intelligence of the infant city that it was able to appreciate the plays of Shakspeare, certain of which present no inconsiderable difficulty even to the leisurely reader at the present day. They were always popular, some of them, like *Richard the Third* and *Macbeth*, achieving instant and unqualified success. They were, however, most popular among the cultivated classes; Queen Elizabeth exhibiting marked partiality for them, and King James the First, when he ascended the English throne, having them performed in great numbers at court, in spite of his Scottish training and early prepossessions. Yet rivalry was not wanting. There were other theatres and other theatrical companies besides those in which Shakspeare played. That was the Age of the Drama in England; and, when Marlowe, Chapman, Kyd, Lyly, Peele,

Greene, Ben Jonson, Drayton, Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher were matching their powers against competitors, there can be no doubt, these would have their own admirers, and no single author could claim unquestionable superiority; though time has decided on Shakspeare's side, and his fame has cast all others into the shade.

His plays, like those of others, remained the property of the company in which he acted, and the text of them must have been subject to the usual alteration; so that there must still be in the text many interpolated passages, which it is now impossible to correct; and, indeed, it cannot be denied that there are plenty of passages which admirers of Shakspeare could wish to be due to other hands.<sup>1</sup> Not one of the plays was published by himself during his lifetime. Some fifteen of them were issued by publishers to supply the literary appetite created by hearing them performed; but these were piratical productions, and they abounded with mistakes. Such little booklets are what are now known as the Quartos; they were sold for sixpence; but good copies now fetch hundreds of pounds. It

<sup>1</sup> That Shakspeare suffered keenly from the tendency of the actors to add jokes of their own to the text of his plays may be gathered from the concluding lines of Hamlet's Address to the Players: "Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it".



was not till eleven years after his death that an authoritative edition of thirty-six of the plays was given to the world by two of his fellow-actors and fellow-proprietors, Heming and Condell. This was a single volume in good print and cost a pound; but a good copy of this First Folio, as it is called, would now cost thousands of pounds. *Pericles* was added in the third edition, bringing the total number of plays up to thirty-seven. In the same edition were included several additional plays, ascribed to Shakespeare; but, though some of these are not without an interest of their own, as specimens of the drama of the time, not one of them is now recognised as from the master-hand.

The only productions of his genius the publication of which proceeded directly from himself were two poems, not dramatical, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which appeared in 1593 and 1594 respectively. The first of these is a mythological story, telling how Venus, the goddess of love, pursued with unwelcome attentions the beautiful boy Adonis, who was too deeply enthralled with the pleasures of the chase to have time to spare for the tender passion, and how at length she saw him slain by the tusk of a wild boar which he was hunting. This piece may have been written some time before it was published; at anyrate it is obviously a youthful production, and in its passion it is too gross and luscious for the taste

of the present day; yet the workmanship is perfect, especially the description of the horse of Adonis, breaking loose from its tether and whinnying after a companion which has appeared in the distance.<sup>1</sup> The other piece retells a well-known story from the early history of Rome—how to Lucrece was adjudged the prize of chastity; but how King Tarquin, inflamed thereby, coveted her beauty and stole from the camp by night to make spoil of it; and how, in consequence of this deed of cruelty and shame, kings ceased to rule at Rome, and the government became a republic. The narration is sustained with the same grace and mastery; but, as every single detail is minutely described, with long speeches between one incident and another, the reading grows tedious to a modern mind. Indeed, an American critic has gone so far as to say that wild horses could not drag readers to those poems now; but that they suited the taste of the age in which they were produced was proved in the way most gratifying to a poet by numerous editions being called for by the public.

Both of these poems were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, a patron of letters several years younger than the author; and to the same person Shakspeare

<sup>1</sup> What does the author mean when he calls this "the first heir of his invention"? was it written earlier than the plays he had been writing for several years? or did he look on it as "poetry" in a different sense from the handiwork of the playwright?

was to give a much more significant tribute of friendship by addressing to him more than a hundred sonnets, which, along with another set addressed to a woman, were published in 1609, but not by Shakspeare himself or, as far as is known, with his consent. More than ten years before their publication these are heard of as circulating in manuscript, as were the sonnets of many other poets at the same time; and someone, having obtained a copy and being minded to turn a dishonest penny, made a book of them, which failed, however, to make a mark, no second edition being called for during the poet's lifetime.

About no other production of his muse has there been such an unlimited amount of discussion. The poet Wordsworth, in a sonnet of his own, affirmed that in the Sonnets Shakspeare had unlocked his heart, to which Robert Browning replied, "If so, the less Shakspeare he;" thereby, however, drawing the retort from Swinburne, "No whit the less like Shakspeare, but undoubtedly the less like Browning". The latest great Shakspearean scholar, Sir Sidney Lee, has laboured long and hard to prove that the Sonnets came from the surface, not from the depths, of Shakspeare's heart and fancy. Sonneteering was a phase and craze of the time. All the young frequenters of Parnassus were pouring forth such compositions by the score. They imitated Italian and French models. They copied one another. Ideas, images, quips of

fancy, rhymes and exaggerations were common property. Shakspeare was just like the rest. He wrote one sequence on a patron and another on a mistress; but any other theme would have answered as well. He was merely practising on his instrument. Here and there, indeed, a deeper note is evoked, as, for example, when he gives vent to his chagrin at having to follow the profession of an actor; but in such a number of sonnets, proceeding from such a pen, a few happy hits were inevitable, and the wonder rather is that there are not more of them. Had the Sonnets formed a secret record to which the poet confided his deepest reflections during many years, it might have been reasonable to search in them for the history of his heart; but the majority were composed within a comparatively limited period—in 1593 and 1594, this critic believes—and they reflect only a transient mood.

This is a comforting theory, especially for those baffled with the effort to discern for themselves the depth and perfection ascribed to these compositions; yet the conflict of opinions is not likely to abate except for a time; for the mystery is too tempting, and "that they were made from the material of experience is certain".<sup>1</sup>

While every aspect of this problem has been argued out to the point of exhaustion, the battle of words has

<sup>1</sup>SIR WALTER RALEIGH, *Shakspeare*.

waxed specially hot round the dedication—"To the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets, Mr. W. H." Every kind of conjecture as to the identity of this W. H. has been indulged in, down to the suggestion that he may have been William (that is, Shakspeare) Himself; but, as Sir Sidney Lee has pointed out, it has been forgotten that, since Shakspeare did not publish the Sonnets, it is not likely that he wrote the dedication. This was done, in all probability, by the publisher; and, W. H. being the "begetter" in the sense of the partner-thief who furnished a copy to the publisher, it is not worth while to enquire after his identity. In forgetfulness of this, an elaborate case has been made out in favour of another noble patron of letters, the Earl of Pembroke, whose initials would appear to have been W. H.; but there is no proof that Shakspeare had intimate relations with him, whereas the dedication of the two earlier poems to the Earl of Southampton renders it highly probable that it was to him the Sonnets were penned too. They appear to be the record of a friendship passing, like that of Jonathan and David, the love of women; but it is impossible to be certain how far the sentiment expressed in them was real; there being in literature nothing less trustworthy in this respect than the language passing between patron and client. The sentiment in the other series of sonnets, addressed to a mistress, might naturally be supposed to smack more

of reality ; but, as the affection to which they give vent is not kindling and crescent, but exhausted and expiring, they lack the glow of true passion. The two series are connected by the singular circumstance, that the hero of the first series had stolen from the sonneteer the heroine of the second ; yet he who has been thus defrauded declares his love for his patron to be so strong that he is willing to resign to him his mistress—not a very natural situation for a poet.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the three important productions above enumerated, there are included in the Complete Works a few other poems—*A Lover's Complaint*, *The Phœnix and Turtle*, *Threnos* and *The Passionate Pilgrim*. These are of trifling value ; indeed, the last-mentioned, though issued by a pirate-publisher under Shakspeare's name, is known to contain nothing really his which is not to be found elsewhere in his works, while it contains a number of pieces by other authors. In all, however, these Minor Poems amount in bulk to about a couple of the Plays ; and it would be a fine question for discussion in a literary society, whether, without the Plays, the Poems would have given their

<sup>1</sup> The Earl of Southampton was born eight years before Shakspeare and survived him the same length of time. Becoming involved in 1600, along with the Earl of Essex, in a conspiracy against Queen Elizabeth, he was imprisoned till the accession of James I., when he obtained release and mounted high in royal favour. See references in Sonnet 107. He died in Holland, on the way to assist the Elector Palatine, son-in-law of King James, in his wars against the Catholics.

author an enduring place in the history of English literature. In such a discussion, however, it ought not to be forgotten that, as a lyric poet, he has to be credited, besides, with the Songs scattered throughout his plays. It may not, indeed, be always quite certain that he was the author of these ; because the dramatists appear not infrequently to have introduced songs current at the time, though not of their own composition ; and Shakspeare, with his gift of adaptation, may have been the very man thus to borrow touches of colour to please the taste of his customers. Yet enough of the Songs have so individual a note as to guarantee their origin ; and they contribute not a little to exalt his position as a lyric poet ; though the Sonnets are his securest guarantee of greatness here, many of them being unforgettable both through depth of thought and felicity of expression.<sup>1</sup>

Shakspeare's earthly fortunes may be considered as culminating soon after James the First ascended the English throne ; for that monarch was so warm a patron of him and his company as to appoint them the King's Servants and permit them to rank at Court with the Grooms of the Chamber ; and, in this character, Shakspeare actually walked in the procession in which King James entered London, wearing a cloak of

<sup>1</sup> The following numbers, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29, 31, 32, 53, 55, 58, 61, 66, 68, 71, 73, 74, 76, 91, 95, 99, 102, 104, 105, 106, 110, 111, 116, 121, 128, 129, 130, 137, 138, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147 are the present writer's favourites.

scarlet, which was the king's gift. By this time he and his fellow-actors had outlived a danger which had for some years threatened their prosperity—the competition of a troupe of boy-actors recruited from the choristers of the Chapel Royal, which for a time was the rage of the town. In this dispute, to which serious reference is made in the play of *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup> Shakspeare was on the one side and Ben Jonson on the other; and most of the actors and dramatists of the day were involved. Ultimately Shakspeare seems to have played the part of peacemaker; and the friendship between him and Ben Jonson became more closely knit. To this period are, therefore, to be referred those wit-combats<sup>2</sup> at the Mermaid Tavern, commemorated by an author of the time as witty as either of them, which have so touched the fancy of posterity and to which a living poet is at this moment giving delightful embodiment.<sup>3</sup> Through the eyes of Thomas Fuller we can still “behold those two, like a Spanish great galleon and an English man-of-war; Master Jonson, like the former, was built far higher in learning, solid, but slow in his performances; Master Shakspeare, with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and

<sup>1</sup> Act ii. Scene 2.

<sup>2</sup> But in my copy of Fuller it is “wet-combats”.

<sup>3</sup> ALFRED NOYES, *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern*, appearing in *Blackwood's Magazine*.



take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention."

In *Troilus and Cressida* there is a remarkable passage in which Shakspeare has depicted the strain and effort by which anyone living in the glare of public life has to sustain his reputation,<sup>1</sup> and in an image borrowed from his own profession, a popular proverb characterizes the unwisdom of a public character

<sup>1</sup> Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,  
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,  
A great-siz'd monster of ingratiitudes.  
Those scraps are good deeds past ; which are devoured  
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon  
As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,  
Keeps honour bright. To have done is to hang  
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty nail  
In monumental mockery. Take th' instant way ;  
For honour travels in a strait so narrow  
Where one but goes abreast. Keep, then, the path ;  
For emulation hath a thousand sons,  
That one by one pursue. If you give way,  
Or hedge aside from the direct forth-right,  
Like to an enter'd tide, they all rush by,  
And leave you hindmost ;  
Or, like a gallant horse fall'n in first rank,  
Lie there for pavement to the abject rear,  
O'er-run and trampled on. Then what they do in present,  
Though less than yours in past, must o'ertop yours ;  
For time is like a fashionable host,  
That slightly shakes his parting guest by th' hand,  
And with his arms outstretch'd, as he would fly,  
Grasps-in the comer : welcome ever smiles,  
And farewell goes out sighing.

lingering too long upon the scene and outstaying his welcome. Strange it is to think of fears of this kind, natural enough in ordinary men, haunting a genius of such brilliance and versatility; yet he not only felt such doubts but acted on them; for we see him at a comparatively early period beginning to furnish for himself a nest far from the scene of his professional labours; and he actually retired to his native place whilst still on the safe side of fifty.

Shakspeare was one-and-twenty when he came to London in 1585; by the time he was six-and-twenty he had established an independent footing as a dramatist, his first entirely original play, *Love's Labour's Lost*, belonging to the year 1590; and thenceforward the intellectual effort of production went on incessantly for a score of years, his last great original composition, *The Tempest*, appearing in 1610. But, before these strenuous years had run half their course, there was evidence that he was accumulating money and, for the investment of it, turning his thoughts to his native town. The first sign of his rising fortune may be discerned in an application, in 1596, by his father for a coat-of-arms, this action being in all probability prompted by the son, who in 1599 actually came into the use of this distinction in the shape of a falcon grasping a spear—evidently a play upon his name. But, in 1597, his fellow-townsmen obtained much more conclusive evidence of his prosperity, when he

purchased the largest house in the town, styled the New Place ; and, although he did not immediately occupy the house, he continued, year after year, to improve the property, by planting a fruit-orchard and in other ways. When, in 1601, his father died, he inherited his own birthplace and an adjoining house in Henley Street ; and, in 1602 and 1610, he purchased considerable tracts of arable and pasture land. To these acquisitions there has to be added the purchase, in 1605, of a moiety of the tithes of Stratford, Old Stratford, Bishopton and Welcombe. At length, perhaps in 1611, when he was forty-seven years of age, having sold his interest in the theatre at London, he settled down as a retired gentleman at the New Place.

Thus was he reunited to his family, from which he must have been practically separated during his London career. His only son had died in boyhood, in 1596. His elder daughter, Susanna, was married, in 1607, to a physician of the name of Hall, who seems to have been a man of energy and ingenuity in his profession, with strong Puritan leanings ; she is said to have resembled her father both outwardly and inwardly ; and on her tombstone it is declared,

Witty above her sex, but that's not all,  
Wise to salvation was good Mrs. Hall.

His second daughter, Judith, was married, in the year of her father's death, to Thomas Quiney, a vintner.

The elder daughter had one daughter and the younger three sons, but the last direct survivor of the poet was a granddaughter, who, by a second marriage, became the wife of a knight; and the portraits of Sir John and Lady Barnard, now to be seen in the birth-house, are manifestly those of gentlefolks.

The point in his domestic relations on which fuller information would be welcome than seems to be attainable is his relation to his wife. In the annals of art there is a painter who, quitting his home and his young wife in the North of England, rose to the highest eminence in his profession in London, where he never disclosed that he was the father of a family, but lived in romantic relations with a notoriety of the time, till, growing old and ill, he returned to the North Country, where his wife, taking him in, nursed him tenderly till he died; and in "Romney" Lord Tennyson has pronounced judgment on the case, his verdict being, that the forgiveness granted by the slighted wife was worth infinitely more than all the paintings even of George Romney. Anything like the same grossness of neglect has not been imputed to Shakspeare; but his wife also was a wronged woman. In his will he left to her his second-best bed; and this has been interpreted as a joke at her expense. But it would have been a very poor joke, coming from such a man; and, if it was intended to wound her, after he was inaccessible to retaliation, it was a dastardly act.

Happily, however, this interpretation is purely conjectural; and the legacy may, on the contrary, have conveyed to the recipient some suggestion of tenderness. In the chapter on the Graver Comedies it has been already noticed that in several of the latest plays there occur incidents of lost relatives being found and the estranged being reconciled; and we are permitted to indulge the hope that, when Shakspeare returned to his home, he found it more a scene of dignity and affection than he had expected, or was perhaps entitled to expect. It has also been already mentioned as well ascertained that in the family of Dr. Hall, his son-in-law, religion, of the Puritan type, had secured a strong footing; and, if it be assumed that his wife, in her virtual widowhood, had sought consolation in this quarter, the key will perhaps fit the lock better than any other explanation of the situation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there was Puritanism still earlier in the family. In the work quoted in a previous note the Rev. Thomas Carter has endeavoured to prove that Shakspeare's father was a Puritan; and one of his proofs is that John Shakspeare defaced the images and sold the ecclesiastical vestments of a church at Stratford. To this Sir Sidney Lee replies that these were acts officially performed by a member of the Corporation. But, if this argument be valid against Mr. Carter, it is equally conclusive against his own argument, that John Shakspeare could be no Puritan because he welcomed actors to Stratford; for this act might as easily as the others have been purely official. Another proof adduced by Sir Sidney is, that, in a book of the time, Puritans are said to have regarded coat-armour with abhorrence, whereas John Shakspeare made application for a grant of arms. But,

Thus had he who, in his youth, had quitted his native town in a condition little better than that of a vagabond returned to it as a man of property and consideration, with still apparently plenty of time to spare, while far away, in the big world, his fellow-townsmen were aware, his name was mentioned with a swelling rumour of fame. Whether he enjoyed the five years of retirement accorded to him or whether, like commoner men who have tried the experiment of abandoning business at an early age, he found time lying heavy on his hands, who can tell? No doubt there would be occasional visits to London, where we hear of him acquiring a property after this; and he may even have produced or collaborated in producing one or two dramas for his fellow-players; but it must be confessed that the record of his remaining years at Stratford-on-Avon is a chronicle of small beer in comparison with the achievement and excitement of his life in London. From his father he is said to have inherited a taste for litigation; and we hear of him engaging in several trifling disputes of this kind. Now and then one or two old comrades from the capital or from the greenroom would invade his privacy, and though some Puritans may have been of this mind, it does not follow that all were. A modern Puritan, well known to the present writer, having been created a lord, was challenged by another Puritan for occupying an inconsistent position; whereupon he replied, not without humour, that, if there were to be no lords, he could not see how Christ could be King of kings and Lord of lords.

over their cups they would fight their battles over again. From such a merry meeting with Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson, there is an old tradition, he contracted a fever from which he died. Of similar weight is the gossiping legend, that he formed one of a company of boon-companions who fared forth to cope in a drinking-bout with the toppers of a neighbouring village; and not only were they ignominiously defeated but, sleeping the night in the open air on the way back, suffered in health through the adventure.

Such rumours have the pettiness of the little town and the uncertainty of local gossip; and the reverent reader of Shakspeare will turn away from them and seek to ascertain, from the poet's latest works, what were the ideas with which he occupied his most thoughtful hours. Happy will he be if, taking with him *The Tempest*, certainly written during this closing period, he is privileged to plunge into some rural solitude in the neighbourhood of Stratford, and, starting from these pages, over which there broods a tranquillity like the peace of God, he is able to piece together, from his recollections, the elements of this great thinker's view of the world. Here, he will feel, is the region in which this man habitually moved; and, whatever may have been his faults and follies, this was the real Shakspeare!

If it were true, as has been sometimes alleged, that Shakspeare exhibits little or no sympathy with religion

or with Protestantism, it would not be impossible—though we should regret it—to repeat, even in reference to such a genius, the sad but true words: “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned”. This would not be without analogy even in his own case; because, as has been pointed out above, he has no eye for what is now regarded by the philosophical historian as most important in the portions of English history referred to in his historical plays—the growth of constitutional liberty, the emergence of the middle class, the beginning of the participation by the people in the government of the country in which they have been born. Nor was it without example in another who was as much the representative of the age as Shakspeare himself. Queen Elizabeth never understood the feelings of her own people about religion; but these were growing more widespread and convinced as she grew old; and, while she still tried to be the same gay and gorgeous personage she had been in her prime, delighting in magnificent progresses from one country-house to another, the population looked coldly on, half-smiling at her affectations and, half-pitying her as an unregenerate old woman. But it would have been strange if, as a student of human nature Shakspeare had been indifferent to the part played in human life by religion or if, as an observer of history,



he had not felt the thrill of the Reformation in England; and a really intimate examination of his works will assure anyone that the case stands far otherwise.

Shakspeare's acquaintance with the Bible is very remarkable,<sup>1</sup> and it has been ascertained that the quotations are seen to be both more exact and more numerous when the Genevan Version is consulted, which was evidently the translation used by the poet.<sup>2</sup> The late Bishop Wordsworth, who published a work on Shakspeare's quotations from the Scriptures, not only proved the number of these to be surprisingly large, by citing them all, but showed that the conception of the universe embodied in Shakspeare's works is, in all its main features, derived from the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is great force in the remark of Mr. Carter that "a man may learn much in later life and be able to quote with some degree of freedom, but he never attains the power evidenced by Shakspeare, unless he has from his earliest days been trained in Bible study. Before words and phrases rise instinctively to the thought and pen as vehicles of expression, they must have been lodged in the mind in the earliest days of youth." His inference is, that the boy Shakspeare was brought up in a home where the Bible was much used; and he has attempted to prove that this home was connected with several others of like sentiments and good social standing in the town. It is certain that Puritanism was very prevalent in Warwickshire at the time, and that some of its leading lights were settled in the county, such as Cartwright at Warwick and Byfield at Stratford-on-Avon. A son of the latter was one of the secretaries of the Westminster Assembly of Divines.

<sup>2</sup> Halliwell Phillipps, *The Version Shakspeare Used*.

<sup>3</sup> In this work, entitled *Shakspeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible*, the following extraordinary statement is made: "Take the entire range of English literature; put together our best authors, who

No one can read the Sonnets without being made aware that the author was thoroughly acquainted with the struggle between the spirit and the flesh described in the seventh chapter of Romans. In sombre dramas like *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* it can be seen how intimately he was familiar with the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the natural heart; and the workings of conscience have never, in all literature, been described to the life as in *Henry the Sixth*, *Richard the Third* and *Macbeth*. But it is in the happier dramas, such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, that the presence of Christian sentiment is most powerfully felt. Again and again he dwells not only with emphasis but with deep feeling on the need of the divine mercy for all, even the best of men having nothing else to depend upon in view of the Judgment Day. This thought, so characteristic of the Reformation—indeed, what but it was the Reformation?—is not only exquisitely expressed in *The Merchant of Venice* but wrought into the very substance of that great drama, in which Shylock stands for the principle that the pound of flesh is to be extracted to have written upon subjects not professedly religious or theological, and we shall not find, I believe, in them all united, so much evidence of the Bible having been read and used, as we have found in Shakspeare alone". The author was Bishop of St. Andrews, and had been tutor to Mr. Gladstone. He had chosen a fine theme, and he executed his task with ability and thoroughness; but here and there he injures his argument by overdoing it; and it is difficult to believe that this sentence is not a case in point.

the last scruple, but the wise and gentle Portia is the exponent of a nobler and a thoroughly biblical philosophy. A passage like the speech of Portia, already quoted, on "the quality of mercy" shows how deep was the sympathy of Shakspeare with the views of the relation of sinful human beings to a holy God which were republished by the Reformers but were first heard—again to quote the words of the poet—

in those holy fields  
Over whose acres walked those blessed feet  
Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed  
For our advantage on the bitter cross.

The electrifying effect of a passage like the following on an audience which had passed through the experiences of Elizabeth's reign can easily be imagined:—

Thou canst not, Cardinal, devise a name  
So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,  
To charge me to an answer, as the Pope.  
Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England  
Add thus much more—that no Italian priest  
Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;  
But, as we under Heaven are supreme head,  
So, under Him, that great supremacy  
Where we do reign do we alone uphold,  
Without the assistance of a mortal hand.  
So tell the Pope, all reverence set apart  
To him and his usurped authority,

No isolated quotations can, however, do justice to the religious depth of Shakspeare's view of the world. In all his dramas God is immanent in human life. Not only is there a conscience in man's nature speaking as the voice of God, but there is a righteousness at the heart of things incessantly working its way to the surface. Goodness, however it may be depressed and impeded, is always on the way to victory ; but wickedness, however lofty for the present its pretensions may be, is always verging towards downfall and exposure. Nor is God only immanent in the world : He is at the same time sovereign above it and omnipotent around it. This earthly life, with all the visible frame of things, is only an islet in the ocean of eternity, and the day will come when the islet will be submerged and will disappear ; but man will still continue and still be under the rule of God through the long ages of eternity.

Sir Sidney Lee, author of the standard *Life of Shakspeare*, who is unsympathetic towards the religious element in the dramatist, is rendered uneasy by the fact, that a preacher, "doubtless," he says, "of puritan proclivities," was entertained at Shakspeare's residence in 1614. He seems to forget that, at that time, a preacher, even if a Puritan, would have been a clergyman and would have officiated in the Anglican Church. What difficulty is there in supposing such a person to have been entertained at the New Place when on a visit to the town? Let us hope that he was a con-

genial spirit, and that the hospitality was enjoyed by both host and guest. That Puritanism was spreading at Stratford when Shakspeare returned to the town is proved by a deliverance against stage-plays by the Corporation at this very time.

However little Shakspeare may have been estimated at his true worth by his fellow-townsmen during the years when he was moving about amongst them as an ordinary citizen, there was appropriate dignity in at least the last act, when he was buried in a grave seventeen feet deep in the chancel of the Parish Church. The spot, in itself, would indicate that the buried man had been a person of consequence, even had there not been erected, before 1623, on the wall above the grave, a bust of the poet in the act of writing, which still survives in a state of excellent preservation.

This represents a man of wellknit frame, with a strong face and high sloping forehead, and, though not executed with a great deal of skill, it must, it may be presumed, have been sufficiently like the original to justify its erection. A decided resemblance to it is borne by a portrait now preserved in a fireproof safe in the birth-house, which displays much spirit and is probably to be preferred to all other representations; but whether it was copied from the bust or the bust from it cannot now be ascertained.<sup>1</sup> A portrait, also preserved

<sup>1</sup> This is the portrait reproduced as frontispiece to the present volume. I prefer it for the reasons stated; but connoisseurs do not as a rule, value it highly.

at Stratford, from which the frontispiece prefixed to the first folio edition of the works was copied, exhibits a certain amount of resemblance to the bust; and its truth to the original was certified in the strongest terms in lines accompanying the woodcut from the pen of Ben Jonson. Thus both of these likenesses are authenticated; but all other representations of the lineaments of the man are more or less conjectural. Certain it is that, even in outward aspect, he was a good specimen of manhood, agreeable in conversation and gentle in manners. "Gentle" was, indeed, the term which occurred most naturally to his contemporaries when they wished to characterize him.<sup>1</sup>

Was Shakspeare himself conscious of being the genius we now know him to have been? or were his contemporaries aware how great a personality they had amongst them?

In the Sonnets the author frequently promises that his lines will immortalise him to whom they were addressed; but at that time every sonneteering poetaster was making the same boast to his patron. From the

<sup>1</sup> Shakspeare's last Will and Testament, after a few words of introduction, proceeded: "First, I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ to be made partaker of life everlasting". Sir Sidney Lee remarks that this was a conventional form; this is true; but so is Mr. Carter's remark, that it was a Puritan, not a Catholic form.

pages of contemporary writers, in both verse and prose, a very handsome collection of tributes to his memory can be made; but appreciations of no less intensity have been showered on authors whose names have been written in water. It was only when the Works of Shakspeare were published in a complete and permanent form that the foundations of his fame were securely laid; for then it was as inevitable that the human mind should find out his greatness as it is that crumbs should attract the sparrows or honey the bees. The very size of the volume was a challenge; for, whatever repulsions or defects might be encountered in it, there was bound up with these a body of work so solid, together with individual passages so sublime and beautiful, that every reader of capacity was rewarded and drawn back again to the feast. As a mere collection of stories the book could not but form an imperishable possession of the English race, as has been perceived by those who, like Charles and Mary Lamb, have, in the interest of the young, retold these tales from Shakspeare. In the perusal of these stories and histories there rise on the reader the figures and fortunes of a series of characters so numerous and lifelike as to form not so much a gallery of portraits as a world of living men and women. The entire work is seasoned with wit and wisdom—with reflections on human life and shrewd criticisms on human nature, with rules to guide conduct, and with the enunciation

in just and moving language of those principles on which depend the dignity and the welfare of both individuals and nations. Every beginner is astonished at the number of lines and passages with which he is acquainted already, because these have passed into the common speech and dialect of men. Except the Bible, there is no other book from which so dazzling a collection of beauties or so complete a body of proverbs and maxims can be culled. But the most all-pervading element is that which has been styled the "metaphysical"—namely, the sense of the universe, as bodied forth by the poet's imagination, being surrounded and interpenetrated by something impalpable and immeasurable—call it thought, wisdom, righteousness, love, or what you will—through which it is ordered and unified, evolving towards a perfection never attained yet sunk as a promise and a hope at the centre of all existence.

As the foundation of Shakspeare's fame was laid by the first publication of his Complete Works, so has the best service been rendered to it by the continued republication of these. By a long series of editors, uninterrupted down to the present day—Rowe, Pope, Theobald, Hanmer, Warburton, Johnson, Cappell, Steevens, Malone, Dyce, Knight, Aldis Wright, Gollancz and many others—the text has been purified, the obscurities have been cleared up, and the thought illustrated, till the reader can complain of no want of assistance. Indeed, a serious danger of an opposite



description has arisen ; for comment has been accumulating to such a degree that the general reader is in danger of being debarred from the text itself by mountains of learned rubbish. These obstacles ought, however, to be disregarded, the reader accepting only as much of explanation as is absolutely required and then committing himself, without bias or preconception, to the actual thought and mind of the author himself.

The lowest stage of appreciation in England was during the eighteenth century, when Hume, the historian, for example, passed judgment on Shakspeare in terms which now stand as the severest judgment on himself. Hume was influenced by Voltaire, who called Shakspeare a barbarian ; and the French mind has, on account of its own constitution, not a little difficulty in comprehending our great poet.<sup>1</sup> It has, however, since Voltaire's days, made the attempt not without success ; and there stands in the city of Paris a monument to Shakspeare.

To the German mind the task of appreciation has always been far more easy and congenial. In Germany there have long existed excellent translations, and Germans have taken the lead in expositions of the mind of the poet. The commentaries of Ulrici,

<sup>1</sup> Even Chateaubriand, leader of the Romantic movement, said that he preferred Racine to Shakspeare, as he did the Apollo Belvedere to an uncouth Egyptian statue.

Gervinus, Elze, Kreyssig and others are accessible in English, and so are the incomparable chapters on the Women of Shakspeare from the pen of the poet Heine. In not a few German universities prelections on Shakspeare form a regular feature of the curriculum, and in the great cities of the Fatherland the plays of Shakspeare hold a leading place in the repertoire of the theatres. There is in Germany a Shakspeare Society, with aims similar to the English ones.

It is, however, to America that we must look for the principal assistance in the preservation and exploitation of this asset of the Anglo-Saxon race. There the merits of the best products of English genius have frequently been both detected earlier and rewarded more adequately than at home; and in everything that concerns the appreciation and interpretation of Shakspeare, in particular, Americans at least rival native scholars and admirers. It is not without significance that, on entering the town of Stratford-on-Avon, the visitor has his attention first solicited by a handsome fountain gifted by an American citizen; and, if he desires not only to see the objects but to feel the atmosphere of the place, he cannot do better than entrust himself to the guidance of the American writers, such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Winter. Washington Irving especially has thrown over the whole town and neighbourhood the glamour of his genius; though

there is now far more to see than there was in his day, through the accumulation and intelligent exhibition of objects of interest in such show-places as the birth-house and Nash's House, next door to the New Place, but especially in the Memorial Theatre, erected on the riverside, in which annual performances take place of select plays, whilst under the same roof there has been collected an extensive library of Shakspearean literature, as well as a picture-gallery, containing the Droeshout Portrait of Shakspeare himself, together with a profusion of portraits of actors and actresses in favourite Shakspearean parts, and many other objects illustrating in various ways the influence of Shakspeare on art.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The most singular contribution from America is, however, what is known as the Bacon-Shakspeare Controversy, in which hundreds of books and articles have been published, to prove or disprove that the author of Shakspeare's works was Lord Bacon. Productions of such wisdom and perfection could not, it was thought, have proceeded from an obscure player, but must have been the work of the greatest intellect of the age. Some professed even to find in the works themselves a cryptogram affirming the Baconian authorship; others preferred the safer supposition of a great author unknown. At a time when it could be assumed that little or nothing was known of the man Shakspeare, the emergence of such a speculation may not have been unnatural; and the writing on both sides may have done something to stimulate investigation into Shakspeare's personal history; but the course of Shakspeare's life is now so well traced out and his personality set in so clear a light, that it would be a credit to mankind if the posthumous work of Mr. Andrew Lang on the subject, *Shakspeare, Bacon and the Great Unknown*, were allowed to close

The Stratford-on-Avonians have done well for themselves by converting their town into a monument to the immortal poet, every industry in the place profiting from the presence of such multitudes, attracted from every quarter of the globe by his fame. But, at the same time, they have done well for the country and the world, by concentrating at one spot so much that is suggestive of the various ways in which Shakspeare has contributed to the culture and advancement of mankind, and that makes real to the imagination him who, as a boy, played in their streets and, in his maturity, walked among them as their fellow-citizen. But the visitor must be of dull and shallow apprehension who, as he paces in a meditative hour by the margin of the Avon, where the footsteps of Shakspeare must often have fallen, is not haunted with deeper thoughts—with the mystery, for example, of so many ordinary lives passing, generation after generation, down into oblivion, but this one emerging from among them to shine on forever with so starry a radiance—and justest of all in such circumstances will be the reflection, that “this also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working”.

this controversy. I do not know whether it is in earnest or in ridicule of the Bacon-Shakspeare theory that a book, entitled *Lord Rutland est Shakspeare*, has been issued by a Monsieur Demblon, professor at Brussels and deputy in the Belgium Chamber.

THE PLAYS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER



## THE PLAYS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

In the foregoing pages the plays have been arranged according to subject; but it is of great advantage to study them also in the order of their production; and, therefore, their titles are subjoined in chronological order.

On the ascertainment of the chronology there has been expended by scholars an immense amount of labour, every source of information being explored; yet the results are only approximate; and in the dates given below no painful accuracy is attempted; it being enough for our purpose to know when or whenabout any drama was produced.

The dates of publication of the Quartos is a guide for about half of the plays, though of course the publication may not always have synchronized with the writing of a play. Then, there are allusions in contemporary literature, the most important of these being the following passage in Meres' *Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury*, published in 1598: "As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakspeare among the English is

the most excellent in both kinds for the stage : for Comedy witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love's Labour's Lost*, his *Love's Labour's Won* (probably *All's Well That Ends Well*), his *Midsummer Night's Dream* and his *Merchant of Venice* ; for Tragedy, his *Richard the Second*, *Richard the Third*, *Henry the Fourth*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet* ;" by which twelve of the plays are certified to have been in existence before the end of the sixteenth century. There are also internal tests, such as the youthfulness or maturity of the thinking, though these are not so easy to apply. A test of great value has been discovered in the versification, that of the earlier being stiff and formal in comparison with that of the later plays, which is much more flowing and unconstrained ; this freedom being secured by running on one line into another and by the use of weak and feminine endings, as they are called, by which the voice, as it utters the words, is carried trippingly into the next line. Of all such indications the minutest study has been made ; and from them indispensable assistance is derived for following the development of the dramatist's mind and art.

Besides the chronological order, I venture to give an original and independent estimate of the comparative value of each play, though this is done with the consciousness that anything of the kind must be tentative and provisional, as even one's own estimate



may alter on closer acquaintance. Yet there is so much uncritical worship of everything proceeding from so great a genius that the general reader may be encouraged by such a recognition of varieties of value to read with his own eyes and to trust his own judgment. If it be asked how the relative merits of so many pieces of high excellence can be determined, it may be answered that it can only be attempted after frequent reading of them all. The consent of the best judges must also be observed, though I have been guided by this only to a limited extent. The theme of a drama being ascertained, we must investigate how it has been worked out and with what effect, and whether all the materials have been brought into unity with this leading thought. Are the actions of the characters motivated? and does the unfolding of the theme come to a harmonious and satisfying close? The number of striking and memorable characters is likewise a test, whether these be comic as in comedies, pathetic as in tragedies, or heroic as in histories. Fine passages, which one returns to read again and again, or would like to read to others, or which have so passed into the current speech of mankind as to be often quoted in speeches or sermons, books or conversation, supply an obvious guide, whether these be prolonged outbursts or figures of speech or little bits of proverbial wisdom. Such are some of the indications, of which one will in one case be more decisive and another in

another ; but there will always remain plenty of room for difference of opinion.

A few notes on each play are added, which are not the product of the moment, but have slowly accumulated during the reading of years ; and, since these are intended not for reading so much as for reference, I have not, in transcribing them, been careful to delete every phrase or remark that may have been already used in the preceding pages. In the order and the dates I have closely followed the arrangement adopted by Sir Sidney Lee, except at the very beginning, where we are obviously dealing with the work of the dramatist's apprentice hand ; but an eye has been kept also on the conclusions of other authorities.

1. **TITUS ANDRONICUS.** About 1590. Class D. This play is a dish of horrors. Yet, I imagine, it may have been Shakspeare's, written in imitation of similar work by others before he had framed his own conception of the drama. It is by no means commonplace. The force of the play lies in the incarnate devil Aaron.

2. **THE FIRST PART OF KING HENRY THE SIXTH.** About 1590. Class D. Subject, the Destruction of a Country by Internal Factions ; see it expressed in the last lines of Act iv., Scene 3 :—

While the vulture of sedition  
 Feeds in the bosom of such great commanders,  
 Sleeping neglect doth betray to loss  
 The conquest of our scarce-cold conqueror.

The uncles and the great-uncles of the King, through strife among themselves, lose France. Talbot is a great character, but Joan of Arc is poorly conceived. There are no comic characters or scenes. The second Act is particularly good. It is not necessary to read any history of the time beforehand, everything being made intelligible by the drama itself; though this is not the case in others of the historical plays.

3. LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST. About 1591; revised 1597. Class B. Subject, Nature, though expelled with a fork, will always come back again. Execution in parts bright and strong; yet a great deal of mere verbal quibbling. There is one strong character, Biron, who sees through the fad from the first and criticizes life in a mocking spirit. Deep speculation on Words, which run away with Armado, make slaves of Ho'ofernes and Sir Nathaniel, bowl-over Costard and Jacquenetta, but are wielded by Moth, who represents the pride of the young poet in his weapon, as well as his perception of the contrast in the world between words and things, learning and experience, study and action. Curious self-criticism, put into the mouth of Biron, near the end of the play, for the use of

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,  
 Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,  
 Figures pedantical.

4. TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA. 1591 or 1593. Class D. Subject, Love and Friendship. Bright and thin in execution; huddled up at the close. Julia a sunny creation. Proteus' name significant of the extravagances and changes of love. But Launce is the gem.

5. A COMEDY OF ERRORS. About 1591. Class D. A mere farce of incident without character. The jealous wife, Adriana, may have biographical significance, and the lines on liberty in Act I., Scene 1, hint the mature Shakspeare.

6. THE SECOND PART OF KING HENRY THE SIXTH. About 1592. Class C. The subject is Ambition's Ladder; or, if Henry be the hero, the subject may be the Unfitness of Feeble Piety for the Game of Life. This is a very powerful play. York is clearing all rivals and obstacles out of the way. Henry, though weak and bookish, yet is invested with a touching and benignant kingliness; what a contrast to his masculine, guilty Queen! The Cardinal, worldly and profane, is an impressive figure, especially in his end. Cade is but crudely conceived. The second Scene of the first Act is finely executed.

7. THE THIRD PART OF KING HENRY THE SIXTH. About 1592. Class D. The subject is simply the history of the time, without any dominant idea. Still, the mild prophetic piety of Henry; over against his figure, the terrible one of Queen Margaret. What an image of life and of woman! The same conception of woman recurs in the next play.

8. KING RICHARD THE THIRD. About 1592 or 1593. Class B. The subject is Conscience. Ulrici says, it is Tyranny. Richard is a hypocrite, inhumanly gross. Great contrast between the rush and compression of events here and their tedious movement in the foregoing play. There is great power in this play, especially in the last Act, but no delicacy or subtlety. The view of woman is extremely low.

9. KING RICHARD THE SECOND. About 1593. Class B. The subject is the Plague of Favourites; see it expressed especially in the last Scene of the third Act. The execution is perfect, everything being clearly expressed, and the language sometimes suggesting the dazzling force of action, at other times the gay spirit of chivalry. Patriotism very prominent, embodied especially in John of Gaunt, with whom is contrasted the ease-loving King. Yet the latter becomes kingly in his fall, especially in the wonderful third Act. Observe in the third Scene of the fifth Act the reference to Prince Hal:—

As dissolute as desperate ; yet through both  
 I see some sparkles of a better hope,  
 Which elder years may happily bring forth.

10. ROMEO AND JULIET. About 1593 or 1597 ; the first sketch may be as early as 1591. Class B. Subject, the Course of True Love. The execution is fluent and natural, but much better in the last three than in the first two acts. Juliet's character is especially great ; she is a perfect incarnation of love ; and her passion makes a complete woman of her, calm, resolute, straightforward ; love is a light which for one glorious hour illuminates her destiny, but then a fire which destroys her. Romeo's love is much less pure, though more passionate. In the first Act he is in love with another, Rosaline ; he is a sentimentalist, loving woman rather than a woman. The Friar's judgment on him is severe in the third Scene of the third Act. Ulrici's remark is acute, that Juliet is more her nurse's than her mother's child, bearing the stamp of the nurse's sensuousness. There is something extremely fine in Friar Laurence—old, yet the confidant of the young and the friend of the whole town ; the reverence of his whole appearance is conveyed without being expressed.

11. THE MERCHANT OF VENICE. 1594 or 1596. Class A. The subject is Friendship. Antonio for friendship sacrifices himself ; Shylock almost destroys friend-

ship; but Bassanio brings back the usury of help; and, at the close, after encountering many dangers, friendship is triumphant. Ulrici says that the subject is *Summum Jus Summa Injuria*—that is to say, law requires correction from equity. The execution is brilliant in the last degree. The play is, in fact, perfection itself, the various threads of interest being easily woven into a harmonious whole, and the three principal characters—Antonio, Shylock, Portia—taking rank with the foremost of the dramatist's creations. In this play there is a fuller working-out of several ideas already found in the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which has the same subject.

12. KING JOHN. 1594 or 1596. Class B. The subject is Patriotism, embodied in the Bastard; see it expressed in the last lines of the play, already quoted in the first chapter of the present work, top of p. 16. Such passages are frequent, and they have a ring of tender and powerful emotion. Maternal love is so fully treated in the person of Constance as to be almost the theme. Shakspeare is now master of a peculiar heroic diction, with sustained eloquence, absolute clearness, and passages of power occurring constantly. The Bastard is a typical Englishman, free, self-scornful, loyal, strenuous, proud of England—"the large composition of this man". Exquisite beauty in the episode of Arthur.

13. A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM. About 1594 or 1597. Class A. The subject is the Power of Imagination; see it expressed at the commencement of the first Scene in the fifth Act. Imagination creates the fairy world for those in the condition of Theseus and Hippolyta. It is lacking in the players, who give their audience no credit for it. The play is more a mask than a comedy, and was composed, it is reported, for a wedding attended by Queen Elizabeth, to whom reference is made as "a fair vestal throned by the West". The execution is wonderful for both complexity and simplicity, the various groups—Theseus and Hippolyta, Lysander and Demetrius, Oberon and Titania, Bottom and the players—being loosely but skilfully connected, like wheel within wheel. There is no development of character; but all the fairy world is exquisitely perfect. The mockery of the plays and players of the day culminates in Bottom, the very genius of stupidity, whose self-satisfaction is infinite. Midsummer Night was a time for spells and general intercourse with the spirit world.

14. ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL. About 1595; rewritten 1602. Class C. The subject is the Prodigal Son. There is much obscurity in the language, but the story is interesting, and the characters are singularly individual and attractive. Helena is a kind of



Ruth, treading without stain a path beset with indelicacy. In the King a noble picture of old age.

15. THE TAMING OF THE SHREW. About 1595. Class D. The subject is Homœopathy: Katharina is cured by seeing her own ill-temper caricatured: see it expressed in the second Act:—

And where two raging fires meet together,  
They do consume the thing that feeds their fury.

The play is a prolonged farce, in which are allowed all kinds of impossibilities.

16. THE FIRST PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH. About 1596 or 1597. Class A. The subject is Ingratitude. The execution is simple and direct. Probably the comic incidents were intended to be a kind of fantastic illumination round the text of the history; but the comedy becomes the picture, the history being but the frame. Hotspur is the image of an irascible dog-of-war, delighting in fighting as a huntsman in the chase—a thoroughly English type. Prince Hal a genius, fond of seeing life in all, even its lowest, aspects, yet capable of everything high and chivalrous.

17. THE SECOND PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH. Same date and class as preceding. The subject is an Uncorrupted Prodigal; see it expressed in the fourth Scene of the fourth Act:—

The prince will, in the perfectness of time,  
Cast off his followers, etc.

The history is, still more, merely a frame to the portrait of Falstaff, with his impecuniosity, his lying, boasting, cowardice, his skill in getting out of difficulties, his shrewdness, his knack of coining epithets. Prince Henry is very lovable; see the contrasted estimates of his character, by his father and the Earl of Warwick, in the fourth Scene of the fourth Act. Shallow in the country, gloating over the revels of his youth in the city, is proud to entertain Sir John.

18. THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR. About 1598. Class B. Said to have been written at the command of Queen Elizabeth, who desired to see Falstaff in love. The subject is, that women may be merry and yet honest; see it expressed in the second Scene of the fourth Act:—

We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do,  
Wives may be merry, and yet honest too.

The execution is effective in a superlative degree; the play is fuller of "go" than anything else of Shakspeare's. Though living in very abject rascaldom, Sir John has a kind of greatness; even at the end he is asked to supper!

19. HENRY THE FIFTH. About 1599. Class A. The theme is the Prodigal Come Home. King Henry

is Shakspeare's greatest favourite; see the picture of him in the Chorus at the end of the third Act. He is afraid of the responsibilities of war yet, when in it, a lion-heart, eager for honour. The execution is in the highest regal style, yet with fringes of the comic. Falstaff's friends are the dregs of a warlike period, floated home from the French Wars. Even in death Falstaff is endowed with a kind of grace.

20. MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING. About 1599. Class C. The subject is perhaps the Power of Hymen. Claudio is so obvious a victim that he allows another to do his courting, and, when Hero disappears, he consents at once to marry her cousin; Benedick is stubborn, yet has to yield. There is some capital writing, especially in the fourth Act; but, as a whole, the plot is not well developed. Don John's work is unmotivated; so is Don Pedro's wooing on Claudio's behalf. Claudio is a hero who is not worthy of the wife he gets, his appearances in the last Act being specially unbecoming. Benedick and Beatrice are the real hero and heroine, but their half of the play is but loosely connected with the other half—that of Claudio and Hero. Many characters and incidents in this play occur elsewhere: compare Benedick with Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Friar Francis with Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, the deception of Benedick with the Malvolio scenes in *Twelfth Night*, Hero's restor-

ation with Hermione's. The title is anything but lucid; and the attempts to explain it are themselves much ado with no result. If the above guess at the subject be right, the title may simply mean that the obstacles to Hymen's course are of no use.

21. AS YOU LIKE IT. About 1599. Class B. The subject is Town and Country Life; see it expressed at the commencement of the first Scene of the second Act:—

Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious court?  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything:  
I would not change it.

The court is a scene of wrong and evil passions; but even the Duke and Oliver are transmuted as soon as they approach the forest. The first two acts are strong, promising something which does not come; for in the subsequent acts we pass into dreamland, and there is a great deal of padding. Rosalind is very well developed, but Orlando, after beginning well, turns into a cypher. The melancholy Jaques is a *roué*, who has tried everything and is always on the outlook for new sensations, but is always dissatisfied with his actual condition. Charles Knight is ex-

tremely happy in characterizing Touchstone, his idea being that, released from the artificiality of court-life and restored to the healthful influences of nature, he ceases to be a fool and becomes a man, falling genuinely in love; so that in future, instead of being a loose, irresponsible hanger-on, he will be a married man, occupying a place of his own in the system of things. Several passages like "There be three things" in the Book of Proverbs. Great passage on the Seven Ages in the last Scene of the second Act.

22. TWELFTH NIGHT. About 1600. Class B. But Mr. Masfield considers this the best English comedy. Twelfth Night or Bean-king's Festival twelfth day after Christmas: to whomsoever falls a bean, hidden in a cake, he becomes king of the revels and, choosing a queen, establishes a burlesque kingdom, in which all kinds of fun and frolic, including games of chance, are carried on. Reason why this name given to play not very clear; perhaps the subject is a Burlesque World, out of which all are at last released. Ulrici thinks the subject is the fantastical choice of partners practised on Twelfth Night. There are two sets of personages and scenes. Those around Olivia, among whom the pompous Malvolio is central, are very amusing. Viola is bright; but the "little villain" Maria is the gem. Sir Toby a very modern character. The Duke is a lover of music and speaks of it in an accent of his

own. Puritanism satirised in Malvolio. The whole is a comedy of errors, and perhaps there is no further design than the unravelling of these—"Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges" (near the end of last Act), and deposits all the characters in their own places. Sir Sidney Lee considers this and the two preceeding plays Shakspeare's "three most perfect essays in comedy".

23. JULIUS CÆSAR. About 1601. Class A. The subject is the Portraiture of a Man, this being, however, not Cæsar, but Brutus; see it expressed at the very end of the play:—

His life was gentle; and the elements  
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world, "This was a man!"

Like Prince Hal, Brutus is one of Shakspeare's prime favourites, sincere, truthful, unsuspecting, placable; see his motives for the murder of Cæsar in the first Scene of the second Act. The execution is as perfect as that of the Sistine Madonna: not a morsel of superfluity; e.g., Cassius' discourse on where the sun rises is an indication of the pedant, who does not sleep o' nights, and the rushing-in of the poet, in the third Scene of the fourth Act, to give his advice, hints the kind of elements which have found their way into the army of the enthusiasts. Brutus' revolt was the work

of bookish men, even Cassius being a philosopher; but the fruits fall to the men of action. Coleridge says that the scene between Brutus and Cassius, in the third Scene of the fourth Act, is one of those which convince him that Shakspeare was superhuman. Yet Antony's speech is greater still. This play should be read along with *Antony and Cleopatra*. The mob as fickle as in *Coriolanus*.

24. HAMLET. 1602 or 1604. Class A. The subject is the Contrast between Ideal and Real. Goethe's idea, in the criticism of this play in *Wilhelm Meister*, is the right one: an artistic nature, intending a life of pure, independent creation, summoned to a practical task, for which it proves to be unfit. The execution is full of passages affording opportunities to actors, with whom it is, therefore, popular; but it is not *totus, teres atque rotundus*, like *Julius Cæsar* or *The Tempest*. There is a tendency to verbiage; and it is absurd to suppose that any actors would have played such a piece as the interlude in such a court at such a time. Nevertheless, the verdict of the world, giving to this drama the foremost place, is no doubt just. In the same way, there are plays of Goethe more immaculate than *Faust*.

25. TROILUS AND CRESSIDA. About 1603 or 1609. Class C. The subject is War with the Gilt off. The madness of Greece, in wasting its resources on Helen

of Troy, is exhibited in miniature in the frenzy of Troilus for Cressida. Love is here only a sensual passion and a mad pursuit, exciting men to their ruin for nothing. It is the same view as is set forth in the second section of the Sonnets. Ulrici supposes a satire on the revival of antiquity and on Ben Jonson. The heroes of Troy were only powerful brutes; observe the horribly vulgar way in which Hector is slain by Achilles. The Greeks are at bottom more barbarous than the Trojans. In the minds of Pandar and Thersites love and war are imaged with all the chivalry and romance absent. But even Ulysses, who looks from a higher level, has to acknowledge the baseness and brutality; he at once penetrates Cressida, and, therefore, he assists at the disillusionment of Troilus. At the end of the first Scene, in the fourth Act, Diomedes puts the whole case with brutal plainness. The language and the entire treatment gave an extraordinary impression of power, capable of wielding any subject in any manner.

26. OTHELLO. About 1604. Class A. The subject is Marriage. In spite of Ulrici, I think Shakspeare intended in this play to expound the rationality which underlies conventionalism. Marriage where there is difference of age, station and race, is likely to prove unfortunate, even though the favoured party have, like Othello, virtue and services. His disadvantages



make him jealous; the Moorish nature, held down by virtue, reasserts itself. Iago is almost the hero; and then the play would be a history of selfishness. In Iago's speeches extraordinary clearness and vigour. He is a thorough disbeliever in human nature, especially in woman; but Emilia, by turning upon her husband at last, proves him mistaken. Iago to be compared with Milton's Satan and Goethe's Mephistopheles. Desdemona is like one of Thackeray's women, utterly lost in the man she loves; something exquisitely touching in her inability to believe in any woman's unfaithfulness. Frequent references to drunkenness, as in *Macbeth*.

27. MEASURE FOR MEASURE. 1603 or 1604. Class B. The subject is Pharisaism. The title is explained in the Duke's speech at the close of the third Act:—

He who the sword of Heaven will bear  
Should be as holy as severe.  
Shame to him whose cruel striking  
Kills for faults of his own liking!

Sensual sin in every degree. The execution is of sombre magnificence, and there is a world of character: Angelo in the centre, the dazzling purity of Isabella, the levity of Lucio, the mild wisdom of the Duke. The expedient in which Mariana is a tool occurs also in *All's Well That Ends Well*; and in both of these plays religion is prominent.

28. MACBETH. 1605 or 1606. Class A. The subject is Sorcery ; see it expressed in the last Scene of the last Act :—

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,  
That palter with us in a double sense,  
That keep the word of promise to our ear  
And break it to our hope ;

and again, in the third Scene of the first Act :—

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths ;  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.

Or, the theme may be the Effect of False Ambition on a Noble Nature. Conscience, also, is here in all its majesty and revenge. The execution is marked by the most blood-curdling power. In Lady Macbeth is exhibited the badness of the bad among women. The comic supernatural in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ; the ideal supernatural in *The Tempest* ; between these the Witches in this play. The composition of a drama on a Scottish theme may have been a compliment to James the First, a priceless patron to the dramatist.

29. KING LEAR. 1605 or 1606. Class B. The subject is the Filial Relation : its beautiful side in Cordelia and Edgar, the reverse in Goneril, Regan and Edmund. But may not the evil in children be due to

the parents' faults? Gloster's sin is apparent; Lear also has a filthy mind, the dregs of which may reappear in the wild-beast nature of his daughters; see this hinted as the theme in the last Scene of the last Act:—

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us.

There is much in this play about the Uses of Adversity. In the execution there is a good deal of obscurity and confusion, yet a rude, primordial strength pervades the whole. Lear is bombastic, till he loses his reason, when his figure becomes gigantic. "Nothing in poetry is bolder or more wonderful," says Dowden, "than the scene on the night of the storm in the hovel, where the King, whose intellect has now given way, is in company with Edgar assuming madness, the Fool with his forced pathetic mirth, and Kent." Count Tolstoi passed on this play very depreciatory criticism on account of the monstrosity of Lear's daughters; but Dowden has this excuse for the unnatural elements: "The reader is asked to grant certain data, and then to observe what the imagination can make of them". Is this, however, convincing? This is one of the places where I find it difficult to agree with the greatest critical authorities, who raise this drama to the front rank.

30. TIMON OF ATHENS. 1607 or 1608, or 1610.

Class C. The subject is Philanthropy turning into Misanthropy. Certainly Timon's latter stage is only his former one in a new phase. Apemantus is the man who has never loved; but Timon comes round to his view only in appearance. Timon's hate kills himself, that of Apemantus is a feather in his cap; Alcibiades is the practical man, whose disappointment with men, instead of killing him, dictates new achievement. The theme may be Money; for the play is full of this subject. Ulrici supposes Shakspeare to be satirising, in the Painter and the Poet, the servile art of his time. The execution is very unequal, the two strands—that of Timon and that of Alcibiades—being but poorly connected. Yet what a language Shakspeare invents for Timon! This play may profitably be read along with *Hamlet*.

31. PERICLES. About 1608. Class D. The subject is fully stated in the last eighteen lines. If anything in this play be Shakspeare's, it is the story of Marina in the last three acts. There are fragments of striking character-painting—especially Cerimon and Marina. Resemblances to *Measure for Measure* are traceable; and there are anticipations of certain things in *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*—compare Cerimon with Prospero, Pericles with Leontes, and note the three significant names, Marina, Perdita, Miranda.

32. ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA. 1607 or 1608. Class A. The subject is Passion in its Splendour and Ruinous Issues. Antony is a kind of Samson, prodigal, magnanimous, full of possibilities, but utterly befooled by women and wine. Cleopatra's people love her; and there are fragments here and there of nobleness in spite of the horrid, bawdy atmosphere of the palace. This play ought to be read after *Julius Cæsar*, which is more perfect in execution, but not perhaps so great on the whole.

33. CORIOLANUS. About 1608. Class B. The subject is Pride; which is in complete possession of the hero, making him unnatural and the foe of his own household; yet it is defeated by the tribunes and overcome by his mother; but it finally ruins him. The execution is throughout on a high level, and the characters have the crispness of outline and the relief of ancient statuary. Especially Volumnia, the typical Roman matron. Menenius describes himself in the first Scene of the second Act. Great scene the third of the last Act. The inconstancy of the mob is so prominent that it might almost be called the theme of the play.

34. CYMBELINE. 1609 or 1610. Class B. The subject is Chastity. The chastity of Imogen is assailed by misfortune, by the malignity of her stepmother, by

her father's anger, by Cloten's brutality and by Iachimo's slander, but it holds-on through all and is justified at last. The nobility of highborn natures is much insisted on. Also contrast of town and country life, especially in the third Scene of the third Act, which may be an indication of the longing for country-life, which Shakspeare gratified soon after the composition of this play by retiring to Stratford-on-Avon. Ulrici thinks the theme to be, that man is not the maker of his own destiny and has no right to try to make his neighbour's. The execution is in Shakspeare's highest style; yet there is an element of obscurity in the later acts, and the unravelling of the threads at the close is somewhat clumsily accomplished. Iachimo is a kind of Iago and the Queen a kind of Lady Macbeth.

35. A WINTER'S TALE. 1610 or 1611. Class C. The subject is Jealousy. To be read along with *Othello*. Powerful picture of the madness of jealousy in the first Act. In explanation of the name see the remark near the beginning of the first Scene of the second Act: "A sad tale's best for winter". The whole is more like a modern novel than anything else of Shakspeare's; and the bustling, self-willed, loyal Paulina, as well as Florizel's love, might occur in a novel of the present day. The noble nature of Perdita, coming out amidst her rude surroundings, resembles that of the princes in *Cymbeline*.

36. THE TEMPEST. 1611 or 1612. Class A. The subject is Wisdom or, perhaps, the Power of Poetry; for without doubt Prospero is Shakspeare himself; Ariel is the spirit of poetry; able to raise and still the tempest, to curb sensuality, to terrify guilt, to bring lovers together; and the breaking of the magician's wand means retirement from the dramatist's occupation. The drama, however, is like a great piece of music, capable of many interpretations. What is freedom? is a question much before the author's mind. The execution is so simple and perfect that nothing finer could be even wished in any work of human art.

37. KING HENRY THE EIGHTH. About 1612. Class C. The subject is Ambition, in Wolsey, or Queenly Greatness, in Catharine. The whole lacks unity; the first act is obscure, and the last one is tagged-on; yet the three middle acts are fuller of human interest than almost any play of Shakspeare's. The Queen, with her love of the people, her wisdom, her unselfish considerateness, her forgiving spirit, is a noble creation. Wolsey is extremely impressive too. The nobility, envious of the clergy, do not show well, but Buckingham is a fine figure. Great scene of Anne Bullen and the Old Lady. This drama is said to have been written by Shakspeare in collaboration with Fletcher; but it seems to me more like a great effort

made by an inferior dramatist than an inferior work of the supreme one.

Thus, it will be seen, there are ten or a dozen which may be called the Best Plays of Shakspeare. In these the conception is so massive and original, or the execution so perfect, or conception and execution are both so felicitous, as to secure for the author the peerless place he holds in our literature. The present writer is sensible of a strong partiality for those plays in which the execution is unexceptionable; and, from remarks made here and there already, it may have been gathered that he would not have much hesitation in assigning to five or six, on this account, a place by themselves; but other elements may be entitled to equal weight, and so the number suggested above may stand. Secondly, there are about as many which may be styled the Next-Best Plays. Owing to something disagreeable or unnatural in the plot or, oftener, to some lack of unity and thoroughness in the working-out of the design, these do not quite attain to such perfection as the very best; yet they are work of a high class, with plots and characters which form part of the common knowledge of the cultivated and with multitudes of passages or lines familiar in men's mouths as household words. On this level Shakspeare can match himself with other dramatists at their best,



though he hardly matches himself at his best. Thirdly, there may be about the same number of plays constructed of slighter materials and put together hurriedly by the playwright to meet the demands of the hour. These the general reader is not likely to read more than once, and he will not be endangering his literary salvation if he does not read some of them at all. It goes against the grain to acknowledge such a "tail" among Shakspeare's works; but one is not a real reader at all as long as one stands in stupefaction before everything written by even the greatest genius, and it is impossible to perceive the greatness of a *Hamlet* or a *Henry the Fifth*, unless one sees the contrast between it and one of the inferior plays. Yet even the latter enter into the total bulk of work by which Shakspeare impresses the mind of the world; and in even the least hopeful of them a careful reader will find lines and phrases which he cannot forget.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At the last moment I perceive that both the above estimates are accommodated to conventional opinion; and I shall be doing better service to the general reader by transferring the markings from my working copy of Shakspeare; though I am well aware that, in so doing, I am taking my life in my hands. This third estimate may, indeed, be almost taken as that of another man as it dates back a considerable time. It was made after close, critical and repeated reading, and without the slightest thought of publication. So far am I from wishing to impose it on anyone else that I have not even adhered to it myself; but it is reproduced for the sake of encouraging others to form an independent judgment. Advantage is taken of the opportunity to arrange the plays in the usual order,

*The Tempest*, Class A; *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, E; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, C; *Measure for Measure*, C; *The Comedy of Errors*, F; *Much Ado about Nothing*, E; *Love's Labour's Lost*, C; *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, C; *The Merchant of Venice*, A; *As You Like It*, C; *The Taming of the Shrew*, F; *All's Well that Ends Well*, D; *Twelfth Night*, C; *The Winter's Tale*, D;

*King John*, A B; *King Richard the Second*, A B; *First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, A B; *Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, A B; *King Henry the Fifth*, B; *First Part of King Henry the Sixth*, G; *Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*, C; *Third Part of King Henry the Sixth*, E; *King Richard the Third*, D; *King Henry the Eighth*, D;

*Troilus and Cressida*, C; *Coriolanus*, B; *Titus Andronicus*, G; *Romeo and Juliet*, B; *Timon of Athens*, C; *Julius Cæsar*, A; *Macbeth*, A; *Hamlet*, A; *King Lear*, B; *Othello*, C; *Antony and Cleopatra*, A B; *Cymbeline*, B C; *Pericles*, F.

A PAGE OF LEARNING



## A PAGE OF LEARNING

ALTHOUGH, in the preface, it has been stated that this book is not intended for scholars, yet a page of learning may be added for the sake of any disposed to proceed further and for the purpose of indicating wherein Shakspearean learning consists.

First, there is the question of the edition to get. The first I ever used was a single volume, costing only a shilling and published, I well remember, by one of the name of Dick. It was trying to the eyes; but there are single-volume editions, at a reasonable rate, unexceptionable in this respect, such as the Globe, the Leopold and that in the Oxford Poets. The edition I have used most is that of Dyce, in eight volumes, one of which is a glossary; there are ample notes, especially on the text. On single plays I have used the volumes of Professor Aldis Wright in the Clarendon Press Series; the introductions and notes leave nothing to be desired. But, of late years, I have used most the dainty volumes of the Temple Shakspeare, edited by Gollancz.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is now a new Clarendon Press Series, edited by J. C. Smith; and I am told that Blackies' (Warwick) and the Pitt Press (Verity) editions of single plays are first-rate.

Next to a good edition of the text, one requires a really good dictionary of words and phrases, and this is found to perfection in Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon*.<sup>1</sup> A concordance is also a necessity, and this is furnished in Mrs. Cowden Clarke's *Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*.

To scholarship, in the more technical sense, belong such subjects as (1) Grammar; see Abbott's *Shakespearean Grammar*; (2) Versification; see the works on this topic of Bathurst and Sidney Walker; (3) Sources of the Plots; see Hazlitt's *Shakspeare's Library* and the introductions by Dr. Aldis Wright, already mentioned; (4) Shakspeare's Place in the History of the Drama; see Boas' *Shakspeare and His Predecessors*; in Dyce's notes there are choice quotations from contemporary and earlier literature; (5) the Music for the Songs; see Cowling's *Music on the Shakespearean Stage* and Naylor's *Shakespeare Music*. On such topics immense labour has been expended not only by individual authors but by Shakspearean societies, both English and German, in the transactions of which will be found notes and essays on every conceivable subject in any way connected with the dramatist.

Soaring into a higher region are works dealing with

<sup>1</sup> Also Foster, *A Shakespeare Word-book and Onions*, *The Oxford Shakespeare Glossary*.

the mind and art of Shakspeare, to quote the title of one of the best from the pen of Professor Dowden. In these inquiry is made to ascertain what subject was possessing the mind of the poet when he was writing each of his dramas, and which aspects of it appealed to him. Then his conception of the world is sought, as this is exhibited in connected series of dramas, such as those of a certain literary species or those belonging to successive periods of his life. Thus may at length be grasped his criticism of life as a whole. In philosophical inquiries of this kind the Germans excel; and I have long had a special relish for the work of Ulrici in this department, as being delicate, penetrative and convincing. This critic was a considerable figure in German philosophy in his day. In appearance he resembled the late Professor John Stuart Blackie, and had not less than he the look of a man of genius. I have heard him lecture on Shakspeare in his old age at the University of Halle. All remarks on Shakspeare which the general reader may come across proceeding from Coleridge, De Quincey, Charles Lamb, Hazlitt, Lowell, Swinburne, Pater, Saintsbury are worthy of attention. At the head of the small books on the subject stands Dowden's *Primer*; but those by Sir Walter Raleigh, Dr. Herford and Mr. John Masfield are also excellent. A repertory of superior criticism, rather bewildering in

extent, will be found in the fifth volume of *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, and no less worthy of attention is the relevant portion of *Periods of European Literature*. In the opinion of not a few the high-water-mark in present-day criticism is touched in Mr. A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

Finally, a good Life of Shakspeare is indispensable, to gather everything up; and the latest is the best, that of Sir Sidney Lee, obtainable at different prices.



APPENDIX

SHAKSPEARE ON MUSIC



## SHAKSPEARE ON MUSIC<sup>1</sup>

"SHAKSPEARE on Music" is a large enough subject to supply material for more than one lecture, and I must begin with throwing overboard a portion of it in which some of my hearers would doubtless be deeply interested, but which I do not intend to treat. I could imagine a lecture being given by a musical antiquarian on such points as the state of music in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as this is brought out in Shakspeare's works; on the musical instruments mentioned by Shakspeare; on the tunes to which his songs were set; on the extent of his own knowledge of music; and so on—topics belonging to the sphere of the History or the Antiquities of Music. But I have not space for such investigations in this lecture; nor, if I had, do I possess the necessary knowledge. Such an inquiry could only be done well by a musical expert; but in competent hands it might be made very interesting.

On one of the points mentioned I may be allowed perhaps a single remark: I should very much doubt if Shakspeare had any special technical knowledge of music beyond what was sure to be picked up by one who, as a theatrical manager, must often have employed musicians.

<sup>1</sup>A Lecture delivered to the Philosophical Society of Aberdeen, 24 October, 1912.

There is, indeed, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, a music-lesson, given by one of the characters, through whose lips the dramatist speaks; which might seem to imply that he possessed the knowledge of a music-teacher. But in the same scene there is a Latin lesson, given by another of the characters. Yet we know that Shakspeare had little Latin and less Greek. The pupil who enjoys the benefit of these instructions is Bianca, the playful sister of Katharina the Shrew; and both her teachers are desperately in love with her. Here is how the Latin lesson proceeds, as the teacher construes for his fair pupil's benefit:—

*Hic ibat* : as I told you before

*Simois* : I am Lucentio

*Hic est* : son unto Vincentio of Pisa

*Sigeia tellus* : disguised thus to get your love

*Hic steterat* : and that Lucentio who comes a-wooing

*Priami* : is my man Tranio

*Regia* : bearing my port

*Celsa senis* : that we might beguile the old pantaloon.

Even a little Latin, you see, might have qualified the teacher for this lesson; and the knowledge of music needed for the other is, it will be seen, on a par with it.

Madam, before you touch the instrument,  
To learn the order of my fingering,  
I must begin with rudiments of art :  
To teach you gamut <sup>1</sup> in a briefer sort,  
More pleasant, pithy and effectual,  
Than hath been taught by any of my trade ;  
And there it is in writing fairly drawn.

<sup>1</sup> The scale.

*B.* Why, I am past my gamut long ago.

*H.* Yet read the gamut of Hortensio.

*B.* (*reads*) Gamut I am, the ground of all accord,

A re : to plead Hortensio's passion.

B mi : Bianca, take him for thy lord.

C fa ut : that loves with all affection,

D sol re : one clef, two notes have I,

E la mi : show pity or I die.

Browning is perhaps amongst our English poets the one who has written most expressly on music; and he, it is understood, has done so with all the knowledge of an adept. Shakspeare wrote from the point of view of the common man. This is his point of view about most subjects: he knows about them only what is common to all. The difference lies in the keenness of insight, the comprehensiveness of grasp, the depth of feeling, the power of expression peculiarly his own. He is the supreme expresser of the impressions common to all.

It is so with regard to music. The musical antiquary can stand above him and define for us the limits of his knowledge; and he may be able to prove that he was ignorant of the technicalities of musical science. But we do not go to Shakspeare for these technicalities, which we can get from common men. We go to him, to hear him speak of music as a part of life and to hear justice done to its power; for he, if anyone, will pluck out for us the heart of its mystery.

In this lecture, therefore, all that will be attempted will be to bring together, and to string on a loose and rather thin thread of philosophy, the chief sayings on the subject uttered by him whom the English-speaking people of the

world regard as the man among them who has best expressed their common experiences. I might have entitled my lecture Shakspeare on the Mystery and the Power of Music. These two words at least express the course which our remarks will follow.

#### FIRST, THEN, THE MYSTERY OF MUSIC.

It is the fashion at the present day to begin to study everything in the very egg; and among the dreary current speculations as to the origin of things you will find now and then the attempt made to imagine how music arose. Philosophers tell you that the very simplest elements of music are certain involuntary sounds which escape from our lips in states of strong emotion: the sighed *ah!* of grief, the bright *oh!* of joy, which come out unawares, are musical sounds; and human music, they tell you, had at one time proceeded no further. Then they speculate on who the first shaggy savage was who, by putting two or three of these notes together, became the first musical composer, and how he was stimulated to do so. But these philosophers forget that the world was full of music before any man uttered a musical note. Or are we to suppose that the lark had to learn her notes and the nightingale her song by the same laborious steps by which man became a musician, and that the practice of their notes began only after man had attained some degree of proficiency? There is surely music in the sighing of the wind in the forest, in the resounding echoes of the thunder, and in the breaking of the waves on the shore. Perhaps the finest illustration in Shakspeare of this natural music is a description of the music of the hounds.

It is put into the mouths of Theseus and Hippolyta in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* ; but it evidently describes a scene witnessed by Shakspeare himself from some height of the rich Warwickshire country in which he was brought up :—

Go, one of you, find out the forester,  
And, since we have the vaward<sup>1</sup> of the day,  
My love shall hear the music of the hounds.  
Uncouple in the western valley ; let them go.  
We will, fair queen, up to the mountain-top,  
And mark the musical confusion  
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.

*Hip.* I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,  
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear  
With hounds of Sparta ; never did I hear  
Such gallant chiding ; for, besides the groves,  
The skies, the fountains, every region near  
Seemed all one mutual cry : I never heard  
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

It is surely in some such experience of the glad open-air life of nature, and not in the conjectures of the dry philosopher, that we are to seek for the origin of music, if, indeed, it is worth while to poke in the primeval mud for the origin of such things at all.

Whatever may have been the origin of music, the next step was to find out the means of producing it with the best effect. With this inquiry man is still occupied ; but many of the means are very old ; and they are very simple. Of

<sup>1</sup> The van.

all the arts, music is the one which reaches its ends by the simplest means. Architecture requires for its purposes very expensive and cumbrous materials. The same is true of sculpture. Painting uses simple means; and strange it is how a few strokes of a pencil or a little dust, mixed with oil and spread on the surface of a canvas, can be made to call up before the mind the breadth and distance of a landscape or the characters and emotions of some great historic scene. But the means employed by music are simpler than even those of painting; for all that is required is the vibration produced in a tense string by the impact of the hand or the vibration produced in a column of air by the breathing of the lips. In a short time the vibrations cease, and the material in which they have taken place returns to the state in which it was before, having lost none of its own properties, though in the process it has given out that which may have yielded to the hearers an exquisite delight—"Is it not strange," it is asked in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "that sheep's guts should hale souls out of men's bodies"?

It is strange that out of the shaking of such a trivial thing there can be extracted a thing so precious; and it is remarkable that humanity so early in its history discovered how, out of the materials of the world around it, to extract this secret, which lay hidden in them, while other secrets—such as electricity—have had to wait to so late ages before being brought to light. These potentialities, which science is only now discovering, were latent in the substances which contain them from the beginning; and who knows how many other qualities, the fountains of future splendour and delight for the life of man, may yet be latent in the common-



est materials of the world? But the chemistry which extracts music goes back beyond the dawn of history. What could be more surprising than that in a column of air, imprisoned in the narrow cylinder of a flute, there should be confined an influence capable of searching with a glowing stream of feeling the hidden corners of the soul, if only the art is discovered of disengaging it from the substance in which it lurks? Is not this more wonderful than the fairy stories of the genii in the Arabian Nights, which the word of the magician could let loose?

There is a passage in *Hamlet* in which this mystery is so touched upon as to show that it had fully presented itself to the mind of Shakspeare. To Guildenstern, who had been sent by the King to sound him, Hamlet, indignant at being thus spied upon, proffers a flute and says :

Will you play upon this pipe ?

G. My Lord, I cannot.

H. I pray you.

G. Believe me, I cannot.

H. I do beseech you.

G. I know no touch of it, my lord.

H. Tis as easy as lying, govern these ventages<sup>1</sup> with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.

G. But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony ; I have not the skill.

H. Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make

<sup>1</sup> Stops.

of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from the lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me."

The most exquisite and effective of all the means of music is the simplest and most natural—the human voice. Although I am no physiologist, I suppose it combines the properties both of a stringed instrument and a wind instrument: it is both a fiddle and a flute. In some directions, no doubt, it is surpassed by other instruments: it cannot produce the volume of sound of the trumpet or send notes so far; but it is an instrument of marvellous range and variety; and it surpasses all other instruments in this, that it has the power of laying hold of another art as powerful as music and twining it into the most intimate union with itself, so as to produce a double effect. The human voice, when it sings, not only emits sounds like other instruments, but utters words, which may be the highest efforts of the art of the poet. Shakspeare has noted this characteristic of the music of the human voice in a powerful image:—

Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews,  
Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,  
Make tigers tame and huge leviathans  
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.

In the same passage from which this is taken, he notes a circumstance on which the effect of music depends, and which may therefore be counted among the means of music. It is a point to which he often refers. Indeed, there is no aspect of music, if I am not mistaken, on which he touches so frequently as its dependence for its full effect on the surroundings in which it is heard. He especially dwells on the power of the night-time to enhance the pleasure of music. The silence, in which it is distinctly heard; the darkness, concealing the surrounding objects which might distract the mind; the peace, into which people relapse after the work of the day is over—all help it. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he says,

The night's dead silence

Will well become such sweet complaining grievance.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the thought is played with in an exquisite passage devoted to the glorification of music. The friends who are awaiting at Portia's country-house the return of those who have been taking part in the great trial-scene go out upon the lawn at night, and one of them says :—

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank !

Here will we sit and let the sounds of music

Creep in our ears ; soft stillness and the night

Become the touches of sweet harmony.

and, when Portia approaches, she also, hearing the music in the distance, unfolds the same delicate philosophy, but gives it a wider application :—

Nothing is good, I see, without respect ;  
Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.

*Nerissa.* Silence bestows that virtue on it, madam.

*Portia.* The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark  
When neither is attended ; and, I think,  
The nightingale, if she should sing by day,  
When every goose is cackling, would be thought  
No better a musician than the wren.  
How many things by season seasoned are  
To their right praise and true perfection.

In this gay talk there is the shrewdest philosophy ; and it reaches up into the highest things : “A word fitly spoken,” says the wise man, “how good it is !” and he says again, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver”.

On the contrary, music, like other things, when it is out of season, loses all its charm. Of this there is an amusing instance in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Benedick, the enemy of matrimony, after hearing a love-song, with which the rest of the company have been charmed, breaks out thus :—

“An he had been a dog that should have howled thus, they would have hanged him, and I pray God his bad voice bode no mischief. I had as lief have heard the night-raven, come what plague could have come after it.” In contrast with this take a passage expressing the same idea in a pathetic form, from the sad story of Richard the Second, the weak king who became great only in the dignity with which he bore his fall :—

Music do I hear?

Ha, Ha! keep time; how sour sweet music is

When time is broke and no proportion kept!

So is it in the music of men's lives.

And here have I the daintiness of ear

To check time broke in a disordered string,

But for the concord of my state and time

Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.

This music mads me; let it sound no more;

For, though it have help madmen to their wits,

In me it seems it will make wise men mad.

Perhaps the profoundest part of the mystery of music is the nature of the pleasure which it affords. Can we tell why one note delights and another jars?

Some have attempted to explain it by mathematics. There are certain heads, said to be grown in large numbers particularly about Aberdeen, to which everything in heaven and earth is a matter of arithmetic, by which they have attempted to explain the deepest problems of philosophy and even of religion. Now, no doubt music can be stated in terms of arithmetic; for each note has its own definite number of vibrations in the atmosphere; and there are certain fixed proportions which must be maintained between those notes which will coalesce in harmony. But this only lifts the mystery one step further back; for, though we know that a pleasant sound represents a certain number of vibrations in the atmosphere and a harsh one another number, we have only put our difficulty into other terms; for why should a note which stands for one number of vibrations be agreeable and one which stands for another

number disagreeable? We no more know why such notes as *Do* or *Sol* are satisfying and triumphant, or why such notes as *Me* and *La* produce a feeling of pathos, than why a sweet thing tastes sweet and a sour thing does not. There is one kind of music for the soldier, to hearten him for the conflict, another for the lover, to lighten his sighing : as Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* says of the soldier turned lover : " I have known him when there was no music with him but the drum and the fife ; and now had he rather hear the tabor and the pipe " : but why in different sounds there should reside such diverse properties, it would tax the greatest philosopher to tell.

On the general question, however, of what the nature of the pleasure is which music gives, there has been a good deal of not unprofitable speculation. No weightier hint on the subject has ever, it appears to me, been thrown out than the remark of Aristotle about a kindred art, when he says that tragedy purges the soul with pity and with fear. What he meant by this purgation has been made a great puzzle ; but it is not, I think, very difficult to divine. If we take the most literal meaning of the word, it will lead us to the true meaning. A man employed in a close atmosphere at a grimy occupation soon gets into an uncomfortable state. He may hardly know what is wrong with him or why he feels uneasy ; but it is because certain of the functions of his body are not exercised, or are inadequately exercised : the delicate pores of the skin are stopped up, or certain parts of the lungs are receiving insufficient exercise, and certain muscles are prevented from working. What he needs is a bath and a brisk walk in the open-air ; so that

the pores of the body may be opened and the pent-up limbs brought into play ; and, when he gets this purgation, he feels as if he were recreated and restored to himself.

Now, art does for the mind what this does for the body. The mind is a far more complex thing than even the body. It contains very varied powers, on the full and healthy exercise of which the pleasure of existence depends. If any of these are unexercised, they are apt to become sources of discomfort or even seats of disease, just like the stopped-up pores or unexercised limbs of the body. Yet common life does not adequately exercise them all. It especially fails to bring into play the higher, more intense and delicate emotions, such as pity and terror, mentioned by Aristotle, and others like them. These emotions are not for the work-a-day world : they would interfere with its operations, which for the most part must be carried on under the strong and calm control of will and intellect. Yet the soul demands the exercise of its capacities ; the nobler and finer emotions need their own fulfilment no less than the commoner powers which do the world's work. And art is the bath or purgation by which they are released and brought into play. At least it is one of the means by which this is done.

Music is a kind of world beside, and yet outside, the work-a-day world, into which he who is choked and begrimed with the work of the day may enter and be refreshed. I never myself hear an evening's good music without feeling that I am skirting the edge of a region of vast and unknown extent, the provinces of which I have hardly learnt to name, but a visit to which is as refreshing to the jaded mind as a bath and a pleasant scamper in the open-air are to the

begrimed miner or the pent-up operative. One character in Shakspeare says to another :

Preposterous ass, that never read so far  
To know the cause why music was ordained.  
Was it not to refresh the mind of man  
After his studies or his usual pain ?

Music may thus be called a diversion ; not merely, however, in the sense of a pastime—though it is that—but in the deeper sense of that which diverts the current of the soul from its too well worn channel into the more devious and flowery ways where it is good that it should sometimes wander. Music sets free a struggling emotion and carries it forward in a natural and regulated progress, till, when it has expended itself, the soul is delivered from it and left in peace. Hence the soothing influence which music exerts, lulling the mind and even the body to slumber. This is what the Duke in *Twelfth Night*, the only prominent character in any of Shakspeare's plays in whom music is a leading feature, means in the subtle speech with which the play opens, though he complains that, in his case, emotion is too fierce to be exhausted and allayed by the charm of music :—

If music be the food of love, play on ;  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.  
That strain again ! it had a dying fall.  
Oh it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound  
That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
Stealing and giving odour ! Enough, no more ;



'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.  
O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou,  
That, notwithstanding thy capacity  
Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,  
Of what capacity or pitch soever,  
But falls into abatement and low price  
Even in a minute; so full of shapes is fancy  
That it alone is high fantastical.

But music, besides guiding emotion to its fruition, has considerable power of exciting it where it does not already exist. This is seen most clearly perhaps in military music, the mere sound of which, when it is good, makes the breast swell with warlike emotion and disposes the limbs to march. But, according to Shakspeare, music may be used to excite other emotions also, even in resisting souls. One of the commonest devices tried by sighing lovers, in his plays, for moving the cold hearts of their mistresses, is the playing of music under their windows. Here is the advice given to a despairing swain in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* :—

You must lay lime to tangle her desires  
By wailful sonnets, whose composed rhymes  
Should be full-fraught with serviceable vows.  
Much is the force of heavenbred poesy.  
After your dire-lamenting elegies,  
Visit by night your lady's chamber-window  
With some sweet concert : to their instruments  
Tune a deploring dump.  
This, or else nothing, will inherit her.

I do not suppose that in our day ladies are much disturbed

by such attempts to win their affections, which the house-dog in the country, and the policeman in the city would be rather apt to frustrate. But the ladies have in our times at this point turned the tables on the gentlemen; for their music is one of the nets in which masculine hearts are entangled; and many a bachelor has secretly formed the resolution of Shakspeare's Benedick that, if he ever marry, the queen of his home shall be a good musician.

In passing, let me say that on the two functions of music just explained—its power to express feeling and its power to excite feeling—are based respectively the Protestant and the Catholic theories of the use of this art in worship. Protestantism allows music mainly to express feeling. It expects the worshipper to come to the house of God with feeling already moving at the centre; and it lends him music only to help it out, to accelerate and regulate its motion, to give it wings, so to speak, that it may reach its object. The Roman Catholic Church, on the contrary, begins at the outside, with the display of art and the subduing power of music, in the hope of awakening the spirit to go out and unite itself with the fervour and rush of what is going on. The danger in the case of Protestantism is that the soul may be cold, having no impulse in itself and too little to provoke it from without; the danger in the other case is that the display outside should be accepted in lieu of the genuine impulse within, and æsthetic delight be substituted for spiritual emotion.

Thus far I have spoken of the mystery of music, and perhaps I have ventured deeper into the mystery than it

was wise to attempt in a popular lecture. The other branch of the subject is

#### THE POWER OF MUSIC.

Here we are on less difficult ground, for which we have in what has gone before cleared the way.

The power of music is a favourite theme with all the poets, and Shakspeare revels in it. In ancient art the symbol of the influence of music was Orpheus, the great musician of the mythological ages. I have quoted already one description from Shakspeare of the power of Orpheus' music ; and here is another, in the form of a song :—

Orpheus with his lute, made trees  
And the mountain-tops that freeze  
Bow themselves, when he did sing ;  
To his music plants and flowers  
Ever sprung : as sun and showers  
There had made a lasting spring.

Everything that heard him play,  
Even the billows of the sea,  
Hung their heads, and then lay by ;  
In sweet music is such art  
Killing care and grief of heart  
Fall asleep or, hearing, die.

In the more prosaic modern world the stocks and stones are not seen to be so susceptible. Whether flowers show any susceptibility to music I am not aware ; they are certainly far more sensitive to other external impressions than was believed even a few years ago. Some of them even catch their own food, as a spider catches a fly. But at

all events the susceptibility to music begins a good way below man in the scale of intelligence. Dogs, elephants and even seals, I believe, will dance to music. Everyone who has lived in the country and happened, as a boy, to accompany a band of music along roads intersecting the fields, in which horses and cattle were feeding, knows the sensation which a stirring strain produces among the dumb but not deaf brutes. Shakspeare has described it with matchless felicity. No doubt he had seen it; and this, like many more of his finest pieces, is a reminiscence of his boyhood in the fields on the pleasant banks of Avon. The passage occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*, a drama peculiarly rich in references to music :—

For do but note a wild and wanton herd,  
 Or race of youthful and unhandled colts,  
 Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud,  
 Which is the hot condition of their blood ;  
 If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,  
 Or any air of music touch their ears,  
 You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,  
 Their savage eyes turned to a modest gaze  
 By the sweet power of music. Therefore the poet  
 Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones and floods ;  
 Since nought so stockish, hard and full of rage,  
 But music for the time doth change his nature.

Among men, I suppose, this influence embraces all, from the most savage to the most refined : none can withstand it. There are differences, however : it is not the same music which appeals to every class. In *A Midsummer-*

*Night's Dream*, that daintiest *mélange* of fun and beauty, when Bottom the Weaver is resting his ass's head in the lap of Titania, the queen of the fairies, whom a perverse spell has caused to fall in love with him, she asks him,

“Wilt thou hear some music, my sweet love?”

and he answers,

“I have a reasonable good ear in music.

Let us have the tongs and the bones.”

The tongs and the bones were the highest of poor Bottom's musical aspirations. And there is a class which prefers the tongs and the bones to all other music still. I remember a worthy magistrate, who had exerted himself to provide some innocent entertainment to keep the loungers of the streets out of the public-house on Saturday nights, complaining to me that he could not get that class to come to hear any music unless the performers were dressed up with woolly wigs and corked faces. The tongs and the bones are the symbol of the crude, laughable and vulgar; and poor Bottom's ideal reigns in the music-hall; it invades the concert-hall and the drawing-room; and sometimes it does not spare even the Church itself. The tongs and the bones—and all they stand for—are the terror of the true musician.

There is, however, an opposite extreme, which is quite as objectionable, or at all events quite as fatal to musical progress. If Bottom loves the tongs and the bones, the professional musician is too apt to affect a music which is a mere display of skill, and a refined society falls into the pretence of delighting in what can never command the

popular ear or move the common heart. This is the rock on which many an attempt to foster the public taste suffers shipwreck. Hundreds of the pieces played and sung in the drawing-room and the superior concert-hall are simply exhibitions of dexterity, in nine cases out of ten wretchedly rendered, because they are far above the powers of those who attempt them, and barren as the sand to nine out of ten of the hearers. Melody is the soul of music; and nothing in which there is not a sweet, full vein of melody will ever be food for the taste of the mass even of cultivated men. In reading a treatise on æsthetics by the philosopher Hegel, I was glad to observe that he adopted this doctrine enthusiastically, again and again avowing his partiality for the music of Italy on account of its possession of this quality. Shakspeare adopted it too. An eminent critic has said that, thoroughly as the great dramatist sinks himself in his characters, you can here and there feel that the man himself is uttering his own sentiments through the mouth of the character speaking. I have no doubt that he does so when he makes the Duke in *Twelfth Night*, who, as I have said, is the musical expert among his more heroic characters, express his musical preferences in the following terms :—

O fellow, come, the song we had last night !  
 Mark it, Cesario, it is old and plain :  
 The spinsters and the knitters in the sun  
 And the free maids that weave their thread with bones  
 Do use to chant it : it is silly sooth,  
 And dallies with the innocence of love  
 Like the old age.

There was a new style of music, brought from France, in Shakspeare's day, as we learn from another of his plays, which wearied and annoyed him : he preferred the old plain song, which the lacemakers and the knitters in the sun could enjoy. And the best music of a country will always be that which springs from the soil and can take a strong grasp of the popular ear and heart. Of course the public taste needs improvement ; but those who aim at this must be prepared to begin with it where they find it ; and it is marvellous how it will answer to a sympathetic hand.

But, I venture to think, there is another sphere where the spread and improvement of this heaven-sent source of pleasure is even more to be desired ; and that is in the homes of the people. Our British society is distinguished from that of the Continent by no feature more markedly than by this, that, while the Frenchman or the German seeks the enjoyment of his leisure-hours out-of-doors, the sober Englishman or Scotsman seeks it at home. It is not desirable to change this ; and, therefore, the true progress of the country can be marked more distinctly by nothing else than by the growth of sweetness and brightness in the homes of the people. A man rather above the condition of a working-man once told me that he invested a ten-pound-note in the purchase of an American organ : " And that," he added, " has turned out to be the best investment I have ever made. It has refined my sons and daughters, who spend their evenings at home instead of on the streets, as they used to do ; and especially it keeps them in on the Sunday evening, when it is a sight to see them gathered round the instrument singing hymns." That was in the

house of a man, as I have said, somewhat above the condition of a working-man, but I do not despair of seeing a similar sight in many a working-man's dwelling; and there could be few better omens for the true prosperity of the country.

It would thus appear that music may be a moral power; and there may be a connexion between music and character. Shakspeare takes a very severe view of the man who has no taste for music. In the play of *Julius Cæsar*, the hero, speaking of Cassius and noting this defect in him, draws from it a very unfavourable inference. The same defect is noted in Othello, who, in spite of some fine qualities, is a mutilated and untrustworthy nature. But in the *The Merchant of Venice* we find the most sweeping judgment:—

The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus;  
Let no such man be trusted.

This is pretty hard on men not gifted with a musical ear; although it is right to say, in the interest of many worthy persons, that the power of enjoying music is a different thing from the power of producing it; and many take a keen delight in listening who are not themselves able to produce a note.

If the man who is destitute of music be so villainous, it might naturally be thought—though it would not be a strict inference in logic—that those who have music in their souls



should be patterns of all the virtues. And there is one virtue in which all singers are well known to be supreme—the virtue of modesty. There is a coyness, a hesitancy, a blushing sweetness about all musical performers which the most inexperienced cannot have overlooked. Everybody knows how unconscious singers are of their own merits, how they depreciate their own acquirements, how much they need to be pressed to make the smallest exhibition of their hidden power. Shakspeare could not of course pass over so obvious a feature of this subject. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Don Pedro says :—

Come, Balthasar, we'll hear that song again.

*B.* O, good my lord, tax not so bad a voice  
To slander music any more than once.

*D.P.* It is the witness still of excellency  
To put a strange face on his own perfection.

And so on ; the song that follows being prefaced with a long struggle between the pressing of the audience and the singer's reluctance. We have all seen this struggle, and we know how childlike and sincere it is.

But, with the exception of this outstanding virtue, Shakspeare is somewhat niggardly in the excellences he bestows on the practisers of this art. His musicians—and his works abound with many companies of them—are, it must be confessed, rather a ragged, losel and vagrant generation ; so that it would appear that, though the absence of music implies, according to Shakspeare, serious inferences as to character, the presence of it does not necessarily imply the corresponding excellences.

Perhaps the practice of any art—be it painting or poetry, music or oratory—which is occupied with the representation of fine and noble feeling is exposed to the danger of a kind of playacting. The expression of feeling can be given without the presence of the feeling itself; and the artist within, if he does not resist his temptation, may become a mask instead of a man. Art often cuts itself off from life and reality, and becomes a languid and unmanly dream, instead of rising, as it ought to do, out of life and returning back to life again. In the music of the Church, the temptation to make music something by itself—a source of æsthetic delight, an artistic display—not infrequently presents itself. But, so cultivated, music is a deception and a degradation. It only attains to its true dignity when it submits to the great law of the Gospel, that honour consists in service—when it makes itself the servant of the Scripture, and the servant of the labouring and heavy-laden souls of men, breathing on the smoking flax of their emotion, till it glow like the Burning Bush with the love and praise of God.

This naturally turns our eyes to the highest of all the aspects of our subject, on which we shall bestow a single glance and then have done.

In such emotions of the soul, vague and mysterious, yet sweet and sometimes inexpressibly delightful, as are ministered to by music some have discerned not the least impressive intimations of man's immortality; and to such suggestions Shakspeare was not insensible. In the passage which I am about to quote he makes use of the very old notion of the music of the spheres: the spheres of heaven,

it was supposed by the primitive poetic mind, make music as they turn on their axes, just as, if small things may be compared to great, a top, as it revolves, creates a humming sound ; but their sound is an exquisite music, in which each of the spheres is for ever enveloped ; and not only so, but the music of all the spheres mingles in a vast chorus of praise to the great Creator. To this sublime fancy Shakspeare has given the sublimest expression :—

Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines <sup>1</sup> of bright gold :  
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.  
Such harmony is in immortal souls ;  
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

This idea—that in the soul there is a music hidden which cannot at present find expression, but that elsewhere there are conditions amidst which it will blossom as in a kindly and congenial home—is surely a profoundly Christian one. Only this home is not in the stars, but beyond the stars. If, under the leadership of the Son of man, we are walking in the good and narrow way, it is to a world filled with music we are travelling ; for, every time the door of heaven is opened in Holy Writ, a burst of melody comes from within. To artistic natures not only is this one of the most potent attractions of the future, but it lends to even the music of this world its deepest significance :—

<sup>1</sup> Plates.

Happy the man whose mind has grasped the key  
That opes the golden gates of harmony :

While round him surge the discords and the jars  
Of life's strange medley, yet his thoughts may be

A true rehearsal even of the bars  
That guide the chorus of eternity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edwards.

## INDICES



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